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# *Professional Wrestling, Whooo!: A Cultural Con, An Athletic Dramatic Narrative, and A Haven for Rebel Heroes*

by

Dalbir Singh Sehmby ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

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## ABSTRACT

In *Professional Wrestling, Whooo!: A Cultural Con, An Athletic Dramatic Narrative, and A Haven for Rebel Heroes*, the world of wrestling is explored in three ways. Essentially, professional wrestling's low cultural status, textual features, and heroic figures are analyzed. In the first chapter, wrestling's cultural status as "fake" is addressed; in other words, reasons why North Americans tend to look down on wrestling are provided. In the second chapter, a program's textual features are analyzed and wrestling is defined as an athletic dramatic narrative. Simply put, wrestling's physical storytelling, mythic ritual, limited carnivalesque, serial melodrama, and narrative voice are systematically explored. In the third chapter, wrestling's rebel hero figure is viewed from the global, the American, and the Canadian perspective. In particular, the metanarrative of the underdog fighting for success is examined. Ultimately, *Professional Wrestling, Whooo!* situates professional wrestling as a unique and culturally-significant form of entertainment.

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**Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research**

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Professional Wrestling, Whooo!: A Cultural Con, An Athletic Dramatic Narrative, and A Haven for Rebel Heroes* submitted by Dalbir Singh Sehmby in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Comparative Literature - Film Studies

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Sept 27/00

## DEDICATION

To the fans, to the performers, and to my family.

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Although this list is not exhaustive, I will list those who are most directly related to this thesis: Aniko Bodroghkozy, E.D. Blodgett, and Gamal Abdel-Shehid. Thank you all for your understanding, dedication, and encouragement.

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I need also to thank my family. Thank you to a real-life hero, a virtuous man who endures life with a big heart and an outpouring of love: my father. Thank you to his tag-team partner, the little lady who really is a giant: my mother. I must thank my older brother, for letting me beat him up when we wrestle and I must thank my baby sister, or else she will actually beat me up.

Sincere thanks for your presence, your understanding, and your love.

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## INTRODUCTION: WHOOO!

"Whooo!" cheer the arena fans. This exhilarating exclamation is echoed across the globe, by fans sitting in front of their television sets in their homes. Even the most secretive and silent of fans will allow such an exclamation to echo throughout his or her inner voice. It is an exclamation of joy and prowess; it is a celebratory release. Professional wrestling is a long-standing popular television program; however, possibly because they themselves do not openly cheer "Whooo!," wrestling is not recognized as an original television genre by academics. Further, despite having been developed throughout the past century, professional wrestling is not widely recognized as a unique twentieth-century entertainment art-form with a poetics of its own. Finally, with such popular appeal, wrestling characters, such as the hero figure, have not been analyzed in terms of their cultural relevance. Thus, I intend to establish professional wrestling as a unique twentieth-century entertainment form and I intend to define professional wrestling as an original television genre with culturally relevant rebel hero figures.

Academically and culturally, professional wrestling is too easily dismissed or widely ignored; wrestling is not regarded as a culturally-significant entertainment art-form. Most importantly, there is no central academic text that defines wrestling as an art-form, explores wrestling poetics, and displays wrestling's cultural significance in our mass media. Scholarly examinations of wrestling are rare, but there are a few texts from which a solid academic field can

develop. Scholars such as Barthes, Jenkins, Fiske, Freedman, Ball, and Mazer form the central texts on wrestling.

In *Mythologies*, Barthes small but still relevant essay "The World of Wrestling," is an excellent basic definition of professional wrestling's dramatic style. However, his essay is outdated and focuses primarily on wrestling in France. Even though the spectacle of excess is still an integral part of the physical performance, wrestling has utilized more complex narrative devices. Hence, Henry Jenkins in "'Never Trust a Snake': WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama," declares how wrestling has changed into a melodrama because of the narrative demands of serial television. Nonetheless, even Jenkins fails to systematically explore what makes an effective television wrestling program.

In *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske devotes his "Carnival and Style" chapter to an examination of television wrestling. Fiske applies Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque and Barthes's spectacle of excess to 1980s Rock 'n' Wrestling. Fiske effectively interprets 1980s television wrestling as a carnivalesque spectacle and reiterates Barthes's argument that wrestling is a ritualistic spectacle of suffering and justice. However, his work is not only outdated, but it also just skims the surface of wrestling as a form of entertainment. Fiske tries to justify 1980s wrestling academically by referring to it as a carnivalesque spectacle. And in a general sense, Fiske is correct in referring to wrestling as a carnivalesque spectacle, but television wrestling -- especially 1980s wrestling -- is not as carnivalesque as he makes it out to be. Wrestling displays carnivalesque aspects, because like any period of wrestling, the spectacle of excess and spirit of play is central to wrestling. However, 1980s WWF television wrestling in particular is notable for its appeal to children and thus can be seen to

be as more of a cartoon, with superheroes, villains, simple plots, and even slapstick. Furthermore, even though the adult academic Fiske may see the carnivalesque when he watches wrestling, average non-academic fans interpret differently, because they are more involved with the plots and characters.

Jim Freedman's *Drawing Heat* brings us to the roots of wrestling through a study of independent wrestlers in the early 1980s Canadian circuit. Freedman travels with Dave "The Wildman" Wilson, providing an insider's glimpse of the promoters, the fans, and the wrestlers. Theoretically, he articulates wrestling's basic moral metanarrative: the individual strives to attain power and success, but must be careful not to be corrupted by such power and success. Freedman's look at wrestling is also outdated, but highly valuable as a document charting an important developmental period in Canadian wrestling. Most significantly, his highly personal and open approach foreshadows recent developments. That is, now wrestling openly sells itself as sports entertainment, its characters are recognized as actors/athletes, and the inside world of wrestling has become the source of internet gossip and the focus of fan magazines.

In *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture*, Michael R. Ball charts the historical roots of wrestling and its eventual metamorphosis into 1980s television wrestling. Systematically, Ball explains the ritual setting of the ring, the ritual characters involved in the action, and the ritual drama of sport and wrestling itself. His outline is complete, but he does not adequately explore the various aspects of wrestling entertainment. That is, wrestling is more than just ritual drama. Moreover, Ball fails to examine why certain wrestling narratives are rituals and thus are significant to the North American psyche.

In *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, Sharon Mazer explore issues of the Carnivalesque and gender. Mazer has an academic background in Middle English drama and sees wrestling as an extension of Middle English drama. However, like Fiske, by trying to justify wrestling academically, Mazer fails to define wrestling as a unique twentieth-century phenomenon with a clear poetics of its own. In addition, by focusing on the Carnivalesque aspect in wrestling, Mazer does not address the fact that wrestling is only a limited form of Carnivalesque theater. Nonetheless, all of the aforementioned texts, including Barthes, Jenkins, Fiske, Freedman, Ball, and Mazer, formulate the corpus of professional wrestling analyses. Moreover, each is successful in his or her own particular aim.

However, even though all of the aforementioned texts and essays are effective and necessary explorations into wrestling, most fail to approach wrestling programs directly; that is, most scholars have not examined wrestling as a television show. First, I will build on these texts and look at wrestling afresh. In order to establish professional wrestling as a unique entertainment art-form of its own, I will address wrestling's lowly cultural and academic status. Then, I will formulate a poetics of professional wrestling, outlining the textual components that make for quality wrestling. Finally, I will examine the cultural significance of the characters, the conflicts, and the performers through a close analysis of the hero figure. In doing so, I will create a text that recognizes wrestling as a significant entertainment phenomenon, as an original television genre with a poetics of its own, and as a relevant cultural depiction of the rebel hero figure.

My approach is dependent primarily upon the often overlooked aspect of wrestling, the actual wrestling show. Primarily, I will build my research on the form and structure of wrestling matches, programs, and characters in the past

twenty years of North American wrestling. In addition, I will utilize the central texts on wrestling and texts on television, sports, drama, and heroes.

In the first chapter, I will address a topic that obsesses just about any casual or scholarly discussion of wrestling: wrestling's status as "fake." Notions of high art versus low art will be addressed, along with notions of high television versus low television. Then, the recent history of professional wrestling will be examined so as to illustrate how wrestling developed a fraudulent reputation. Also, viewing wrestling will be considered an uncomfortable activity in the sense that it exists between sport and drama, between masculine narrative form and feminine narrative form, between a sexual and non-sexual display of human form, and between documentary reality and creative fiction. Rounding out the chapter are wrestling's emphasis on spectacular excess, its media-hybrid form, and its reappropriation of its culturally-assigned con-game or "fake" status.

In the second chapter, I will conduct a thorough textual analysis of professional wrestling programming. Along with being called "fake," wrestling has been called choreographed athletics, ritual folk drama, and the carnivalesque. Wrestling is all that and more. Specifically, wrestling is athletic dramatic narrative and I will explore each area in an organized manner. As athletics, wrestling builds upon sports, as a semi-choreographed, semi-improvisational physical story telling. As drama, wrestling has three major components: mythic ritual, carnivalesque theater, and serial melodrama. As drama, wrestling presents us with a central working-class myth, a limited form of carnivalesque, and an action-packed soap opera. The last textual element is narrative. In wrestling, the narrative voice is both covert and overt. Covert narrative refers to the directing techniques, editing, lighting, and so on. Overt narrative refers especially the role of the announcer, but

includes music and other elements of sound as well. Ultimately then, the second chapter will identify wrestling not as one dominant style, but as a hybrid-form, capable of emphasizing one element or the other, dependant upon audience tastes and programming success.

In the third chapter, I will explore the hero figure in professional wrestling. Specifically, I will explain why wrestling has such a global appeal, by associating wrestling's central working-class myth with the ancient heroic monomyth. Then, I will explain the formulation of the modern American hero through standards set by Puritan religious writers, Horatio Alger novels, and dime novels. In addition, I will explain the way mass media circulates heroic stories of historical, popular entertainment, and contemporary figures. Finally, I will identify the role of the Canadian figure in professional wrestling. Specifically, an analysis of notions surrounding Canadian identity as expressed within American wrestling will be conducted. Finally, wrestling's ideal will be characterized as a rebel hero, who is representative of a culture, but, at the same time, is also an outlet for feelings of difference and exile.

# CHAPTER I: It's Sooo Fake: Wrestling's Cultural Status as a Con-game

## INTRODUCTION

Bring professional wrestling up in a conversation and for one reason or another, someone is almost bound to say, "It's sooo fake." And it is not only the faultfinders that use the phrase, even sincere fans find themselves using the phrase, if only to clarify that they have enough intelligence to comprehend that wrestling is dramatized athletics. Culturally, when we think of great art, we do not think of professional wrestling. Television and art have a contested relationship already, and so professional wrestling and art have a much harder time. Nonetheless, through the work of scholars and the enthusiasm of the viewing public, television programming has, for the most part, become recognized as an important twentieth century medium. However, pick up the average text, reference, or encyclopedia on television, and professional wrestling is conspicuous by its absence or relative marginalization. Professional wrestling is either reduced to a minor blurb or not there at all. This, despite the fact that one of television's first hits was the Dumont network's wrestling shows and some of television's first celebrities were wrestlers. Furthermore, fifty years later, wrestling remains a constant staple of television programming across North America and around the world. However, for serious television scholars, there has been a certain disdain for wrestling. By and large, despite its high viewership and longevity, it has been ignored and consequently deemed as possibly unworthy and certainly unartful programming. Specifically though, wrestling's unartful reputation stems from five basic factors: its status as low art, its historical development, its liminal existence, its spectacle of excess, and

its media-hybrid form. Ultimately, by acknowledging its low status and by articulating entertainment to be a type of permissive deception, the producers, performers, and the fans themselves reappropriate wrestling's con-game status, thus heralding all entertainment as a successful illusion, or fake.

First, the notion of low art versus high art will be introduced, placing television within the realm of low art and wrestling within the realm of low television programming. Second, wrestling's historical development during the early twentieth-century will be shown to contribute to its lack of social validation as mainstream entertainment. Third, unlike more clearly demarcated and thus comfortable forms of entertainment, wrestling causes anxiety in viewers because it occupies a liminal space in the following ways: between sports and drama, between masculine narrative form and feminine narrative form, between its display of the human body for both the male and the female gaze (in both sexual and non-sexual ways), and in between reality and fiction (as evident through its various forms of metafiction, including the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, role playing within the role, literary and real-life reference, and self-referentiality). Fourth, its fundamental configuration as a spectacle of excess will be established. Fifth, wrestling's lack of formal recognition as a television genre will be demonstrated through its media-hybrid form. Finally, by reappropriating its own low cultural status through seeing entertainment as a form of deception, wrestling raises a historically simple con into a powerful form of popular art, where being fake yet still appearing realistic is the ultimate goal.

## LOW AESTHETICS VERSUS HIGH AESTHETICS

Before looking into the specific reasons for wrestling's unartful reputation, the general notion of working-class art versus upper-class art must be addressed. Our entertainment today is comprised of both elite and mass forms. For the most part, high culture entertainment, such as ballet, opera, and classical music, is regarded as aesthetically complex and intellectually appealing. High aesthetics have been and continue to be critically delineated and appraised within universities, colleges, and artistic societies. Historically, however, the elitist applause for high art has come at the expense of lower-class art. Distinctions in art go hand in hand with distinctions between class, taste, and overall aesthetic standards within our culture. Fiske in *Understanding Popular Culture* explains Bourdieu's main argument about class distinction and art in the following way:

> culture is used to distinguish among classes and fractions of classes, and to disguise the social nature of these distinctions by locating them in the universals of aesthetics or taste. The difficulty or complexity of "high" art is used first to establish its aesthetic superiority to "low", or obvious, art, and then to naturalize the superior taste and (quality) of those (the educated bourgeoisie) whose tastes it meets. A critical industry has been developed around it to highlight, if not actually create, its complexity and thus to draw masked but satisfying distinctions between those who can appreciate it and those who cannot. Artistic complexity is a class distinction: difficulty is a cultural turnstyle -- it admits only those with the right tickets and excludes the masses. (121)

In broad terms, high culture applauds upper-class forms of art, creating specific standards of quality and taste. Therefore, high art is considered to be of merit and

thus deemed worthy of critical study. However, the critical industry surrounding high art has often overlooked the merit of what may be termed low art, working-class art, or popular art. Having said that, the coexistence of high and low art is possible, without creating a binary opposition between the two. In fact, popular culture blurs the distinction between upper class and working class artforms. To digress for a moment, my overall aim is not to flip low art to be above high art, for that will only reverse our standards of taste, rather than democratizing them. Hence, I will ultimately display the aesthetic significance of form that is considered not only low by broad artistic standards, but also by television standards. However, first, wrestling's status as low art and low television must be further explained. So, getting back to the main argument, because popular culture is popular or because mass media is of the masses, by its very nature and due to traditional boundaries of taste, popular mass media exists in opposition to the more critically acclaimed high art.

Television itself is a popular medium and so it is exists outside of the high art realm. Abelman in *Reaching Critical Mass* outlines several reasons why television is not considered to be a serious entertainment medium. For instance, among his reasons he includes that televiewing has not been embraced by the intellectual community, that television is too accessible, and that television is nothing but popular art. Specifically, Abelman points out that elite art is perceived "to be unique, technically and thematically complex, and produced by an identifiable artist of stature and personal vision" (13). In contrast, popular art

> strives to be familiar, common, and conventional and is typically produced by unknown and unrenowned artists for commercial distribution and consumption on a large scale. It is often created for profit and, as

> a form of artistic expression, is devalued by its very popularity. (13)

In other words, television is a form of popular and profitable art and thus television is not considered as aesthetically complex or creatively original as elite art. And so, by extension, the programs on television are also not considered as aesthetically complex or creatively original as their elite counterparts. Nonetheless, not fulfilling the qualifications of elite art does not dismiss the richness that may be found in popular television.

Consequently, despite popular culture's lower status in relation to elite culture, media studies is working towards establishing itself as a worthy form of academic exploration. By relying on the auteur approach and masterpiece tradition, cinema, at least, has been recognized as an important cultural medium with its own aesthetics and creative potential. For the most part then, film studies has legitimized itself as an academic discipline; following film studies, television studies is attempting to establish itself as a discipline in colleges and universities around the world. Specifically, television studies has spawned a great volume of books, papers, and lectures on the medium and its programs. However, as mentioned earlier, despite being one of the first and longest-lasting programs on the air, professional wrestling is notoriously marginalized. On the one hand, wrestling is low art, because it is on television and television is a popular medium. However, on the other hand, even television critics have largely ignored wrestling as a significant form of popular programming. Thus, it is absent or marginalized by television critics.

Wrestling's marginalization in television studies is partly due to the fact that the traditional effort to validate the artistic worth of television required critics to

create a hierarchy of their own. For example, the 1950s live dramas have been compared to the high art of theatre and thus within such high company are argued to be worthy forms of popular art. Or consider, for instance, America's Public Broadcasting Station (PBS), renowned for its array of quality and educational programming. PBS garners much fewer ratings points than the major American networks, and it is critically appraised. This combination of low ratings and high critical praise is almost a cliche in television; unfortunately then, popular television is often notoriously deemed unworthy of critical or academic worth. So, within even television criticism, there is a distinction between high-quality and low-quality programming that originally drew upon the standards set by comparable forms of high art. This ranking within television criticism exists even today. For instance, consider the very categorization of the 1950s as the Golden Age versus the trash television era of the late 1990s. Such labeling illustrates the blatant distinction between high and low television. Also, it has become a habit of television critics to cite Milton Berle's ability to sell television sets, but "Gorgeous" George and the communal spectacle of wrestling are just as responsible. On the hierarchy of high and low television, a comedy variety show is lower down the scale then a live drama; in this scheme, professional wrestling is even lower than a comedy variety show. Hence, Berle is popularly recognized as the man bringing televisions into the homes of viewers across America, while "Gorgeous" George is typically not awarded such recognition. This despite the fact that wrestling would have a greater general appeal across America than Berle's show for two reasons: the proliferation of wrestling programs in television's early days and the wide appeal of wrestling spectacle. According to Hofstede in *Slammin'*, television wrestling first aired on July 30, 1948 on Dumont and shortly thereafter, from 1949 to 1951,

ABC, CBS, and NBC all broadcasted wrestling bout; so, "the first channel surfer could find wrestling shows six nights a week" (9). It seems more realistic that a simple good versus evil spectacle would reach more people across America than a New York based comedian with a clear urban slant to his humour. Wrestling's basic action is more capable of translating across regional, ethnic, and class differences than Berle's variety show. This is not to degrade Berle's importance in early television, for he is a legendary performer and television star. However, Berle's popular culture status as Mr. Television is illustrative of the lack of critical and cultural recognition afforded to performers in a just as popular and maybe even more accessible form of programming, professional wrestling. So, despite mainstream success with the advent of television, wrestling is still marginalized within popular studies.

Wrestling's absence and marginalization in television encyclopedias and textbooks indicate wrestling's status as not only low art, but also as low television art. To clarify, the general reasons for wrestling's unartful status are twofold. One, wrestling is both folk entertainment and mass entertainment. Its origins are folk, stemming from travelling carnivals and vaudeville-type shows. This folk aspect still exists in the travelling arena performances. Reaching millions of people through television, wrestling also is a form of mass entertainment. Hence, by being both folk and mass, wrestling is low art. And two, wrestling's unartful status is compounded by television criticism's own relative marginalization of the genre. Most importantly, television studies does not even recognize professional wrestling as a television genre. To explore wrestling's unartful status then, four more aspects need to be examined: its historical development, its liminal aspects, its spectacle of excess, and its media-hybrid form.

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

With a history consisting of county fair hustling, an athletic contest fraught with controversy, and an incident of inadvertently revealing the winners before a major event, professional wrestling secured a fraudulent reputation. Due to its travelling carnival roots, wrestling gained a reputation as a scam, and not as an entertainment artform. According to *The Unreal Story of Professional Wrestling*, Mazer's *Professional Wrestling*, and Morton and O'Brien's *Wrestling to Rasslin'*, professional wrestling stems from traveling carnival shows. To pass the time between military battles, American Civil War soldiers would wrestle one another. After the Civil War, several ex-soldiers brought their skills to county fairs and travelling shows. Very simply, carnival strongmen/wrestlers would challenge anyone in the local crowd to an impromptu fight, waving a healthy bet as financial temptation. Motivated by pride and lured by money, the eager local would take up the challenge only to end up embarrassed by the professional. (As an aside, such issues of pride, money, and embarrassment remain central to wrestling narrative today). And as legend has it, to lure the eager locals into the fight, the carnival wrestler would sometimes have a "plant" in the audience. The "plant" would put up a good fight and barely lose, convincing the eager locals that they would be able to finish what the "plant" almost could. Then, like a pool shark, the strongman would defeat the eager local and walk away with the money. (Again as aside, deception, betrayal, and trust are other issues which remain integral to wrestling nowadays). Therefore, quite early in its development, wrestling gained a seedy reputation, as a carnival show hustle.

At the turn of the century, an incident involving Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt further tarnished wrestling's legitimate status both as sport and as entertainment. Gotch and Hackenschmidt were two of the most popular and capable athletes of their day. According to *The Unreal Story of Professional Wrestling*, in a rematch between the two, the American Gotch hired a "hooker," a wrestler who is capable of physically crippling an opponent, to injure Hackenschmidt in a training bout. Hackenschmidt's knee was torn and the rematch was easily won by Gotch. Later news got out that Gotch had hired someone to injure Hackenschmidt and wrestling's legitimacy as a fair sport was further tarnished. As is apparent, wrestling's history reads like a well-plotted drama, and like wrestling itself today, we wonder how much of it is real and how much of it is good story. Nonetheless, the high profile Gotch and Hackenschmidt incident is a major reason why wrestling sporting contests would not be a viable sell to sports fans. Further, since the final bout between Gotch and Hackenschmidt was not even staged for clear dramatic entertainment, wrestling did not clearly define itself either as a legitimate sport or as a spectacular stunt show.

Historically, after an initial mainstream boom as sporting entertainment, wrestling was no longer validated as a social form of entertainment, because its tricks were revealed, the winners of a major event were revealed before the event occurred, and newspaper sports columnists stopped covering it. To prove that being liminal causes anxiety in the spectator, consider the fact that wrestling lost its mainstream appeal when it was publicly admonished as choreographed theatrics. According to Hofstede in *Slammin'*, "no wrestling-match decision made after 1925 can be taken at face value." In the early decades of the 1900s, according to the *Unreal Story of Professional Wrestling*, the tricks of wrestling moves and the

release of the winners before a major event occurred. As a result, gate receipts fell and wrestling was relegated to much smaller venues. In other words, wrestling lost its mainstream audience. For instance, with sports writers dropping wrestling from newspapers, wrestling lost its playful guise as a competitive sport. And consequently, wrestling was no longer socially validated as worthy entertainment. To explain, even if audiences knew that wrestling was staged, for years newspapers devoted a section to wrestling and winners were never revealed in advance. And so, the public was allowed to be in on the fun; in other words, wrestling was socially validated. If the newspapers' sports pages played along, then, in a way, it was socially permissible for the average viewer to play along. Due to events which ruined its social acceptance, did not permit spectators to suspend their disbelief, and spoiled the dramatic suspense of a major card, professional wrestling was no longer socially validated, turning mainstream fans away. Concerning the serious inquiry wrestling faced, Hofstede in *Slammin'* declares:

> The first serious investigation into wrestling's authenticity was launched in January of 1934 by the New York State Athletic Commission. Accusations of "title juggling" and "secret agreements" resulted in a week of testimony from the top wrestlers of the day, including Londos, Ed White, and Dick Shikat. The commission outlawed syndicate agreements between promoters and also decided to ban the drop kick from competition. Nobody paid much attention to either edict. (8)

Matches faced serious criticism, but professional wrestling was too successful as an entertainment business to revert to its roots as an amateur-style athletic contest. Viewing an event that was publicly regarded as a "fake" sport by media authorities,

such as newspapers, was now embarrassing for mainstream audiences. This lack of public and critical validation exists even today. Critics or non-fans denounce wrestling as "fake," fans must defend what they know is sports entertainment, and scholars must explain that they know wrestling is "fake." Thus, unlike any other popular artform, wrestling is still commonly regarded as "fake," while movies, television shows, and music videos are not dismissed solely for their artifice.

## THE LIMINAL ASPECTS

Professional wrestling continued to be sold as an athletic contest between two combatants, with clear rules, and shimmers of showmanship; however, due to its sport-like appearance, but clearly staged theatrics and lack of social validation, wrestling became socially uncomfortable for the average viewer in the early part of the twentieth century. More importantly though, viewing wrestling in any time period causes anxiety in the viewer, because wrestling exists in a liminal state; that is, wrestling exists in between sport and drama, in between masculine narrative form and feminine narrative form, in between its sexual and non-sexual display of the human form, and in between reality and fiction.

Culturally, we have high praise for athletic skills. We value the strong, the fast, and the best. The most skillful athletic performer is praised for his or her abilities and lauded as a hero and icon. We believe training, dedication, and hard work makes champions. And thus, perseverance, focus, and confidence are values we hold dear and see realized through our athletes. Sports figures embody the ability to overcome poverty, the desire to never give up, and some of the highest physical and mental potential of the human species. Culturally then, we do not like

it when sports are rigged, when our athletes cheat, and, in the case of wrestling, when it is all just a show. Hence, due to its resemblance to sport, but its clear status as drama, wrestling is criticized and degraded as "fake."

Wrestling's guise as sports gives it a veil of legitimacy that, however thin, situates it within our understanding of competitive athletic contests. That is, when we watch an athletic contest, we are viewing just that, a competitive test. For instance, in a boxing match, we watch two athletes fight one another according to the rules of the game, which are enforced by the referee. Judges on the outside assess the match and score points for proper blows and deduct points for any infraction. Each individual round is timed and the entire bout is a set number of rounds. At the end, the boxer with the most points or the one who has scored a knockout is declared the winner. As viewers then, we watch the event unfold before us. Putting gambling odds and fight histories aside, we do not know what is going to happen next, we do not know how long it will last, and we do not know who the winner will be. This is what gives boxing and other sports their unpredictability; so, we as spectators watch in order to see who is the better, more skilled, and more capable athlete. Thus, when viewing a sporting contest, we are caught up in a type of live documentary athletic narrative unfolding before our eyes.

Professional wrestling, by extension, builds upon this model of the legitimate athletic contest unfolding before our eyes and consequently situates wrestling within our understanding of competitive sports. In other words, by mimicking the style of a sports contest, wrestling demands the viewer to situate himself or herself as a legitimate sports spectator. The difference being, however, that wrestling is more of a form of entertainment than an athletic contest. Hence,

wrestling mocks a space which is culturally considered almost sacred. We take our sports seriously, on the local, national, cultural, or personal level, because it is associated with our local, national, cultural, or even just personally-motivated fan pride. The riots in European soccer matches, hockey fervour in Canada, the American nostalgia for baseball, pay-per-view boxing match ratings, and the global ritual of the Olympics are just some examples of how serious we are about our sports worldwide. By being a physical play about the athletic contest and by being presented as an athletic contest, professional wrestling occupies a liminal space which lends itself to being socially demeaned as "fake." By occupying a liminal space, neither being a sports contest nor a fictional drama, wrestling causes anxiety in viewers and critics.

Furthermore, wrestling is liminal in another potentially anxiety producing way, by being in between masculine and feminine entertainment forms. That is, on the one hand, wrestling is a highly masculinized program. Typically, athletic men shout at one another, battling athletically for pride, honour, and a gold championship. Women also wrestle, but they are the less typical combatants; nonetheless, when the bell rings, they too settle their dispute or display their prowess in an aggressively athletic manner. Wrestlers are not average men and women either, rather they are often well-muscled, strong, and capable of dangerous athletic feats. And the wrestling match itself is a highly masculine narrative. There is little or no talking; two individuals fight one another; there is a clear beginning, middle, and end. In a wrestling match, when the opening bell rings, the talking usually stops. More importantly, the honourable hero typically stops talking and starts fighting, while the villain may be more likely to stop and talk or complain, to the referee, to the fans, to the other wrestler, to his or her

valet, or to the television camera. In a match, there is usually a clear time limit, where the two combatants struggle physically. In a way, a match can be likened to the final battle in an action film. Pure fighting between the hero and the villain. They fight physically to determine a victor. In a wrestling match, the victory is sealed with the final three-count and ending bell sound, giving the narrative a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. Thus, on the one hand, wrestling is a highly masculine narrative form, as exemplified by the wrestling match itself.

However, on the other hand, and simultaneously, wrestling is highly feminine in form. In "Never Trust a Snake," Jenkins argues that serial fiction, such as soap opera, exemplify a feminine aesthetic; however, wrestling does not fit neatly into the scholarly television tradition that separates masculine from feminine narrative form:

> Television wrestling runs counter to such a sharply drawn distinction: its characteristic subject matter (the homosocial relations between men, the professional sphere rather than the domestic sphere, the focus on physical means to resolve conflicts) draws on generic traditions which critics have identified as characteristically masculine; its mode of presentation (its seriality, its focus on multiple characters and their relationship, its refusal of closure, its appeal to viewer speculation and gossip) suggest genres often labeled feminine. These contradictions may reflect wrestling's uneasy status as masculine melodrama. (4)

Wrestling is a serial fiction displaying men expressing emotion. It is a sports opera, a melodrama without absolute beginnings and ends, but rather an extensive and ongoing middle. Story twists and turns occur abundantly, and like their soap

opera counterparts, wrestling has developed a whole industry of gossip on the internet, in fan magazines, and through 1-900 telephone information lines. Another feminine aspect can be illustrated in wrestling's routine melodramatic expression of emotion. The wrestlers and all the other characters openly express their feelings in hyperbolic and excessive ways, be it anger, fear, humiliation, sadness, or happiness. And even though they most often express anger, wrestlers verbalize a great deal; they argue, protest, and even bicker. So, wrestling is also a highly feminine form, as exemplified by the serial story structure, the melodramatic emotional expressions, and the verbalization of personal feelings.

In addition, wrestling displays the human form for both the male and female gaze in both sexual and non-sexual ways. Unlike the clearly objectified female or clearly objectified male, wrestling bodies are presented in a liminal way as well. As Mulvey states in "Visual Pleasure," "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (*Film Theory*, 750). In wrestling, there are scantily-clad and heavy-busted women that often accompany wrestlers to the ring as managers, girlfriends, and so on. Their role then is intended to visually satisfy the heterosexual male viewer's sexual gaze. However, at the same time, male wrestling bodies are abundantly available for the heterosexual female gaze. In fact, all a wrestler typically wears is a type of colourful underwear. Moreover, some of the first heroes and many of the heroes still today are loved for their looks by female fans. And according to the *Unreal Story of Professional Wrestling*, the first time female spectators came to modern sporting events was for 19th century wrestling matches. So, in wrestling, male and female forms are available for both the

heterosexual female and heterosexual male gaze. Further, the human body is also on display for the homosexual gaze of males and females as well; male wrestlers battling with one another and female wrestlers battling with one another provide possibilities for homosexual viewing pleasure. However, there is more to wrestling than sexual gazing.

Male wrestlers and female wrestlers are also enjoyed for non-sexual gazing. In fact, by convention, wrestlers wear very little and may be well-built. And so, by the commonness of their clothing and musculature, wrestling bodies do not exist purely, if even predominantly, for the sexual gaze. More typically, the heterosexual/homosexual male and the heterosexual/homosexual female can watch wrestlers engaged in athletic combat for the sake of athletic combat and story. For example, a heterosexual male can watch and enjoy two men fighting one another for their moves/prowess, and then sublimate the homosexual gaze. He may watch a match to simply discover the winner of an ongoing story line. And since wrestling by convention consists of scantily clad men and women, the bareness of two men in athletic combat will not be necessarily interpreted as sexual for the heterosexual/homosexual male/female fan. As is apparent, the combination of viewing strategies can be as numerous as the type of viewer. Moreover, the ability of an individual to alter his or her viewing strategies at any given moment can make for an innumerable amount of viewing strategies. Nonetheless, on a general level, wrestling bodies exist for both gazing at the human form in a sexual way, but also in a non-sexual way for following a match and story.

So, wrestling is liminal and consequently anxiety-producing, because it exists between sports and entertainment, between masculine and feminine form, and because it offers the human body for both the masculine and the feminine gaze

in both a sexual and a non-sexual manner. In addition though, wrestling is liminal and anxiety-producing because of its playful status between reality and fiction. Hornby in *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, defines metadrama as "drama about drama; it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself" (31). Hornby goes on to point out the varieties of overt metadrama as the play within the play, the ceremony with the play, role playing within the role, literary and real-life reference, and self-reference (32).

In professional wrestling, every type of overt metadrama routinely exists. For instance, when describing a play within a play, Hornby points out that in order to be fully metadramatic, the outer play must have characters and a plot and that these elements "must acknowledge the existence of the inner play; and that they acknowledge it as a performance. In other words, there must be two sharply distinguishable layers of performance" (35). In wrestling, when a form of play within a play occurs, it is most commonly not revealed as metadrama until later or if it is, it is a play within a play through parody. For instance, in one World Championship Wrestling (WCW) Nitro program, Bret Hart goes through a heart-felt revelation that he must fight for the fans once again and stand up to the then villainous Hollywood Hulk Hogan. Finally, at the climactic ending match, Hart and Hogan wrestle strenuously, luring another hero, Sting, into the ring to help Hart against the cheating Hogan. However, at that point, Hogan and Hart join forces and attack Sting, collapsing the entire narrative and revealing their match to be "fake." In other words, within the narrative, Hogan and Hart were wrestling a "fake" match in order to lure and injure Sting. So, here is a version of the metadramatic's play within a play, where wrestling's choreographed nature is displayed through Hogan and Hart's trick on Sting and the audience. The play

within the play is also evident in wrestling parody. For instance, in the WCW a couple of years ago, the New World Order (NWO) arrived to take over the organization. During their takeover, they would interrupt a WCW program and broadcast their own wrestling matches; but, their matches were clear parodies of wrestling poetics. Their broadcast parodies the ring entrance of the wrestlers, the role of the referee who does not enforce any rule, and the announcers who build up excitement over the action. Moreover, the play within a play is fundamental to wrestling, because wrestling openly presents itself as a "work." A "work" is an old term still used by fans and promoters. Fundamentally, a "work" refers to the ability of the wrestlers in a match to con the spectator into believing its reality. Hence, every wrestling show is a successful "work" if the audience is caught up in the show and believes the emotion and fighting to be real. However, this believability is not just in the dramatic suspension of disbelief sense; rather, the ultimately successful "work" makes the viewer actually believe or doubt what is real and what is not real. Increasing the interpretive pleasure of viewers, the legendary notion of a "shoot" match is central in wrestling parlance. A "shoot" is an actual wrestling bout, where the wrestlers are in a sporting contest with one another. Theoretically, since any match can be a "work" or a "shoot," the possibility exists for viewers that a choreographed bout may accidently or through an actual conflict between the performers, turn into a "shoot."

Next, Hornby says that the ceremony with the play "involves a formal performance of some kind that is set off from the surrounding action. As with play within plays, however, a certain blurring occurs when one tries to categorize ceremonies within plays" (49). Like drama, wrestling shows have a ceremonial quality of their own, without necessarily being full ceremonies. And so, a

ceremony within a wrestling shows blurs the distinction between the spectacular ritual of wrestling and the ritual ceremony within the narrative. For instance, when heroes are crowned champions, there may be an impromptu ceremony mimicking victors of legitimate sporting events. The locker room empties and the new champion is carried on the other wrestlers' shoulders, champagne is showered, and the hero straps his belt on dramatically. Illustrating its use of cultural rituals ceremonies, wrestling narratives have employed and continue to employ weddings, funerals, and birth announcements.

Concerning role playing with a role, Hornby declares: "When a playwright depicts a character who is himself playing a role, there is often the suggestion that, ironically, the role is closer to the character's true self than his everyday, "real" personality" (67). The best example of role playing within a role in wrestling can be seen in the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) with Vince McMahon's change of persona before and after an infamous incident with Bret Hart. Before McMahon's actual double-cross of Hart, McMahon was as a generally friendly promoter, bringing entertainment into people's homes. After the behind-the-scenes double-cross is documented and released by the National Film Board (NFB) documentary *Wrestling With Shadows*, McMahon's character switched into an evil promoter, intent on controlling the careers of his talent.

As for literary and real-life reference within a play, Hornby explains that "the degree of metadramatic estrangement generated is proportional to the degree to which the audience recognizes the literary allusion as such" (88). In terms of wrestling's references, the most obvious ones are references to other popular media, especially comic book/television characters, news events, and movies. For instance, like his comic book counterpart the Incredible Hulk, Hulk Hogan during

the early 1980s portrayed a nice guy who, when provoked, turns into an unstoppable wrestling force, fueled by anger and striving for justice or retribution. And the famous Stone-Cold Steve Austin borrows the name Steve Austin from *The Six Million Dollar Man* television series. News events often turn into story lines, such as Hulk Hogan's famous battle with Sergeant Slaughter which reflected the ongoing events of the Gulf War. Popular movies are playfully referred to as well. For instance, when *Titanic* was in theatres, fans held up signs of their hero Goldberg, which read "Goldberg sank the Titanic." Often motivated by marketing, fictional films and actual documentaries overlap with wrestling narrative. Hulk Hogan made the fictional film *No Holds Barred* and soon after was tormented in wrestling rings by his opponent/actor in the film, Zeus. After *Ready to Rumble*, the film's star David Arquette managed to win the WCW world heavyweight championship. His worrisome bride Courtney Cox did not want him to wrestle, but Arquette took home the championship, reflecting his wrestling obsessed character in the film comedy. Actual references to the personal lives of wrestlers occur frequently as well. The infamous double-cross of Bret Hart by Vince McMahon sparked some of the most successful narratives of double-crossing by an evil boss in WWF history. At times, wrestlers even strip away their persona while still in the ring and communicate to fans as themselves, only to put their persona back on, using their real-life situations to build fictional narratives. Parodic self-referentiality occur as well, when, for instance, midget wrestlers put on a slapstick show, or when humourous wrestlers mock the drama of wrestling matches. For instance, Screamin' Norman Smiley is a silly wrestler who wins matches without even knowing it, through slapstick bumblings and accidents. Recently, while seriously advising kids against the dangers of backyard professional wrestling and

instructing them in the disciplined skills of freestyle amateur wrestling, Smiley defeats the twelve-year old backyard champion and runs away with the kid's tin-foil belt. The point is that all of the major varieties of overt metadrama as defined by Hornby exist regularly in wrestling, including the play within the play, the ceremony with the play, role playing within the role, literary and real-life reference, and self-reference.

So, the anxiety in viewers and critics stems from wrestling's occupation of a liminal space between sports and entertainment, between masculine form and feminine form, between masculine and feminine gazing, and between reality and art (through its metadramatic elements). Nevertheless, wrestling has not been widely considered to be a complex entertainment art-form because of its spectacle of excess and its hybrid form.

## WORKING-CLASS SPECTACLE OF EXCESS

Wrestling is a performance spectacle. As Barthes made clear in *Mythologies*' (The World of Wrestling), professional wrestlers display "the great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice" (19). Culturally, high art tends to be graceful, subtle, and refined; unlike wrestling's loud sweaty violence. Due to the standards of high art, drama which is melodramatic and excessive are looked down upon, especially if the audience is of the lower or working class. In wrestling, the movements are grand, loud, and over-the-top, while the audience has traditionally been the lower or working class. Due partly to the demands of playing to an auditorium of fans and due partly to the effort of selling the emotion of the drama, wrestlers must move, speak, and express themselves in an excessive way. Like

their operatic counterparts, wrestlers must be big. In the opera, a form of high art, there is a comparable over-the-top expression of emotion and gesture. However, since the traditional audience is higher class and more educated, opera is not categorized as low. Wrestlers need to ensure the fans in the back can see and hear them, so their matches often incorporate sweeping gestures and loud bursts of agony. Furthermore, trying to make a match into a dramatic story, wrestlers hold excessive facial gestures and incorporate hand signals and glances to the audience. Like the high art of traditional folk mask plays in several cultures, including ancient Greece and Japan, wrestlers without masks or painted faces must express their character and emotions in an excessive way. Unlike the refined and often subtle movements of the ballet, which is usually performed in more intimate settings, wrestlers pound the mat and slam one another with a crude and comparably ungraceful choreography. Unlike the impassioned actor who is blown up to a larger-than-life form on the movie screen to deliver subtle and silent facial or bodily expressions and then to be praised for his nuances, the wrestler must be larger-than-life. The wrestler cannot utilize subtlety and silence as a sign of his or her skill, unless he or she is guaranteed a close-up. And even then, the auditorium of fans will miss out on the subtlety. Besides, wrestling is not about subtlety; rather, it is about excess -- wrestling is excess. Despite such an over-the-top performance style however, those wrestling shows in larger arenas tend to use a large screen to complement the action. The giant screen broadcasts the program to the arena audience, allowing even the most distant fans to view close-ups, behind-the-scenes skits, and any action that makes its way outside of the auditorium. While wrestlers enter the arena, they are not only accompanied by theme music, but also a signature montage of images that are presented on the

giant screen. Watching an arena show is a multi-media event, complete with fireworks, music, and big screens. Notwithstanding wrestling's excess, a wrestling show can be complex and layered. Most importantly, unlike the actor who is told never to look into the camera and thus destroy the viewer's stance as a voyeur, the wrestler must look out to the fans and into the camera to fully express his charisma and to declare his threatening persona. In most films, the performers look at one another and interact with one another only. This preserves the alternate reality presented to us by the fictional world; so, the viewer is an outsider looking in. In wrestling, the performers look and interact with one another, but also interact with the audience in the arena and at home. Wrestlers flash their hand signals in salute to their fans, acknowledge placards, and deliver their messages to the fans and the other wrestlers through direct address. They stare into the camera to yell, to grunt, and to groan. Put together with the traditionally working class viewer, the ungraceful noise of a match, the growls and expressions of the wrestlers, and the wrestler talking directly into the camera, are all deemed low entertainment style; as a consequence, wrestling is looked down upon critically.

**MEDIA-HYBRID FORM**

Along with this style of spectacular excess, wrestling is often deemed low art within television because of its media-hybrid form. By media-hybrid form, I refer to the multitude of genres television wrestling can be compared to and thus be dismissed as a clear genre of its own. Like the news, the sports game, the cartoon, the sitcom, the music video, commercials, the talk show, the soap opera, or the action drama wrestling is an established and long-standing genre of

television. Moreover, and maybe because it has elements resembling news, sports, cartoons, sitcoms, music videos, commercials, talk shows, soap operas, and action dramas, professional wrestling has not been generally regarded as an original genre of television by scholars or been referred to as a genre by even the public. Television wrestling utilizes so many elements of the medium that one program can sum up all that is on television, from silly cartoons and serial melodramas to lewd sexual innuendo and gory violence. A wrestling show is a news program in terms of its documentary style. Presented live, like a news broadcast, the wrestling reporters interview wrestlers as though they are politicians arguing with other politicians. They chase down wrestlers, conduct in-depth profiles, and bring us fast-breaking events as they occur. Like a sports broadcast, wrestling is a spectacle of fireworks and pageantry, while still utilizing all of the markers of legitimate sports, such as referees, announcers, managers, trainers, time limits, and so on. The violence sometimes resembles Saturday-morning cartoons. Muscular superheroes battle evil villains, the big bully torments the lovable little character, and the excessive use of chairs and tables and baseball bats are like the animated counterparts of anvils and explosions. Like a sitcom, wrestlers can get into humourous predicaments or exchange comic insults. With rapid-fire editing, shaky handheld cameras, scantily clad women, and music, at times wrestling can be confused with a music program. Within a wrestling show itself, commercials of upcoming events, posters, toys, videos, and pay-per-views frequently appear. The fights that begin in interviews resemble trash talk show battles; the ongoing melodrama resembles soap operas; finally, the stunts resemble the fights in television action dramas. Thus, the simultaneous existence of differing television

styles in one program gives wrestling its media-hybrid form, which is another reason for wrestling's lack of critical recognition as an original and artistic genre.

**BEING FAKE**

Interestingly, whereas being a unique North American twentieth-century entertainment phenomenon with metadramatic aspects presented in a hybrid media form may seem critically beneficial for any other program, such elements are widely ignored in wrestling. Like baseball, professional wrestling is an American game, springing forth from Civil War tussles into carnival attractions and then stadium events. However, unlike baseball, professional wrestling is not culturally regarded as America's pastime. Yet, consider how similar metadramatic elements are praised and deemed complex and artsy in literary and film forms, but, in wrestling, they are seen as lowly cons. Even though multimedia internet narrative forms are now being explored as new and dynamic forms of story-telling, the hybrid media form of wrestling is hardly noticed. That is, the wrestling show is still criticized for openly tricking the viewer and playing with reality. This stems in part from wrestling's overall low status culturally, but structurally, this stems from wrestling's own blunt attitude towards entertaining. Wrestling's low status has been dealt with throughout this chapter, based fundamentally upon the class status of its traditional audience. As for wrestling's blunt attitude toward entertainment, Mazer points out the following in *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*:

> Professional wrestling jargon is threaded throughout with the language of the con game. Most wrestling performances are considered "works," both in the sense that the wrestlers should be "working" to

> please the audience and in the sense that one wrestler in particular "does a job" to "put the other guy over." This "jobber" (often referred to in current fan parlance as "JTTS" or "Jobber to the Stars") must work to put on a good show, a convincing display of the desire and potential to win, in order to make the other wrestler -- either a star or a new wrestler that the promoter wants to "push" -- look good to the fans. Given that the professional wrestling performance is largely improvised, the potential always exists for a "shoot" in which the plan is forsaken, an accident occurs, or a genuine conflict erupts with violence spilling over from display into actuality. (22)

In the simplest sense, wrestling itself strips away all pretense and refers to entertainment as a con. In a way, this is a crude but accurate description of entertainment. An actor is a liar, playing a part to fool an audience into believing his or her dialogue, emotion, and predicament as authentic. To be considered effective, the spectator must fall for the performance; the spectator must be conned into believing what he or she is being presented is authentic. Of course, as Mazer's description of wrestling jargon illustrates, the tone here towards entertaining is much less glamourous than Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." Nonetheless, the overall aim is clear. As Esslin's *Anatomy of Drama* puts it, drama is "mimetic action, an imitation of the real world as play, as make-believe. The drama we see in the theatre and for that matter on the television screen or in the cinema is an elaborately manufactured illusion" (86). So, like wrestling, all entertainment is a con. However, due to cultural acceptance, a critical industry of praise, and a traditionally higher class audience, certain forms of entertainment are hardly, if ever, referred to as con-games. In fact, they have attained the status of art, being said to provide an alternate reality in which the spectator can become

engrossed within and thus be thoroughly entertained. Wrestling's referral to itself as a con is due, in part, to its aforementioned carnival roots as a con-game. Maintaining such jargon is a type of humbling homage, that reminds the wrestler and the viewer that ultimately, the glamour, plots, and spectacle being presented are, at their roots, a playful con. Being on the cusp of sports and entertainment also affords the use of the term con. A rigged sports event is known as a con. Wrestling's rigged athletics does not diminish the genuine athletic ability required. In fact, it may even enhance it. Wrestlers must be careful not to injure their opponent or themselves, yet at the same time must present the illusion of dramatic violence. Without the luxury of resorting to trick camera angles and special effects, an athlete's self-control and choreography must function at its peak in order to maintain such a level of combative excitement, yet still not cause any serious harm.

Wrestling's cultural status as a con also has another purpose: it places the onus on the performer. Mazer points out in *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* that "All participants, including fans, present others with at least a bit of a "kayfabe," a term which is taken from nineteenth-century carnival, medicine show, and sideshow practice and simply refers to a con or deception" (22). Having been historically criticized as a con, referring to wrestling as a con today is a clear acknowledgment and reappropriation of its low cultural status. As Mazer continues to explain, "most wrestlers are proud to be called kayfabians because it means they're in on the (con) game" (23). Hence, wrestling's most famous critical label is as a con, but wrestlers and fans have reappropriated the term so as to lend credence and respect for the show, while (to reiterate) still paying homage to its roots and humbly accepting that in a sense sports entertainment is a playful con. In

a way, the reappropriation of the term con brings lowly wrestling a bit higher and even pulls higher forms of entertainment a bit lower. For, if high art is a mere con as well, then the entertainment playing field is all the more level.

Hence, referring to wrestling as a con places a large emphasis on the performer and thus exalts the wrestler's ability as a live entertainer. Whereas film and other media forms can rely on camera techniques and special effects, wrestlers must rely on themselves. Referring to all entertainment as a con places the onus on the performer's ability to be a good con-artist. In comparison to the less risky and more controlled performances delivered by films then, wrestlers are the better, more dedicated performers. Whereas Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" is appropriate for all entertainment viewers, with the use of "con," the emphasis clearly resides with the wrestler's ability to perform for a live audience. For established or carefully produced forms of entertainment, the "willing suspension of disbelief" is easy. The silliness of ballet is overlooked; for instance, men and women prancing around in skin-tight apparel are a convention of the form and so, the viewer tries to respectfully enjoy and understand the show. If you laugh at a ballet when you are not supposed to, you could become victim of the glare of other patrons or even be kicked out of the performance. You are clearly being disrespectful of the form and of the dancer's difficult skill. In wrestling, if you laugh, something is funny. You may feel that wrestling on the whole is silly and thus deserves to be laughed at. And culturally, this is permissible; it is all right to laugh at wrestling if you do not like it, because it does not have the elevated cultural status and demand the same social respect as high art. More importantly though, you could be laughing at an aspect of the wrestling show, such as the plot

or the performance. Because of this, wrestlers must be more aware of how their performance is being interpreted by a particular audience.

Wrestling success directly stems from pleasing the audience by putting on an engaging, spectacular, and believable show. If the wrestler does not succeed in delivering a good wrestling show, the repercussions are immediate. Fans could laugh and openly ridicule the performer. Or worse, fans could walk out or not come to another show, thus reducing the size of the gate, and therefore reducing the wrestler's reputation and his or her salary. By being referred to in wresting parlance, as a kayfabian (a con artist) or a worker, the active role of the wrestler (as opposed to the passive role of the viewer suspending disbelief) is quite apparent. The wrestler must work to please the audience and put on a good show; the onus is on the performer to deliver, to draw viewer interest, and to incite emotions. Of course, the viewer must play along. Without the viewer's participation, there can be no form of any sort of entertainment. However, in wrestling, the viewer's appreciation or lack of appreciation wields more direct democratic power than in other forms of entertainment. In this sense, wrestling's ability to effectively please the audience is a way of maintaining its respectful status amongst fans. The wrestler's close attention to a fan's willingness to suspend disbelief is a way of respecting the people that support the wrestling industry. Whereas higher entertainment forms can please upper class or educated audiences for their traditional merit, complexity, and insider understanding, at its roots, wrestling pleases its traditionally working class audience by empowering them with a voice and responding to their entertainment wants. The viewer must make an effort to acquire an appreciation of the subtleties or quality of a form of high art, such as classical music. In comparison, the simplicity of wrestling conflict makes it

more immediately accessible to a wide range of viewers. However, in being so easily comprehensible, wrestling creators and performers must work specifically to satisfy the narrative and character developments desired by the audience. Wrestling gives the average working-class viewer a voice in his or her entertainment. The dynamics are clear, two combatants in physical battle. Everyone can understand it, because there is no barrier in terms of language or education. The working class viewer can choose to spend his or her money elsewhere, if the wrestling show does not provide what he or she enjoys. And even though nowadays average viewers cannot actually jump into the ring and challenge the champion carnival strong man to a match, at least average viewers can voice their opinions and their cheers can push a favorite into the ring against the current champion. Therefore, despite its inclusion of high art elements, wrestling is still referred to by critics and even fans as a con. In doing so, wrestling acknowledges its lowly status and places the onus on the performer to entertain and respect the views/support of his or her audience.

## CONCLUSION

Wrestling is considered unartful, because we as an audience do not like to be openly deceived, as the history of wrestling publicly deceived its audiences. Culturally, we revere legitimate athletic contests, because it represents some of the best values we hold dear. Further, athletic contests unfold unpredictably before our eyes, making us cherish the sense of authenticity a sporting event embodies; so, when wrestling mocks this authenticity by mimicking the style of legitimate sporting events, the serious viewer is uneasy. Critics and viewers are made uneasy

by the liminal elements in wrestling, since it exists not only between sport and drama, but also between masculine narrative form and feminine narrative form, between its presentation of the human body for both the male and female gaze in sexual and non-sexual ways, and between reality and art, as evident through its metadramatic aspects. Further, due to its excessive style and traditionally lower class audience, wrestling's loud, brash, and in-your-face approach marks it as excessive and thus uncomplicated or critically unworthy. Since a single television wrestling program can embody the traits of a myriad of television programs, it is not clearly recognized as an original television genre of its own. Finally, since wrestlers and fans reappropriate wrestling's low cultural status through its articulation of all entertainment as a type of deception, calling wrestling "fake" takes on multiple meanings. Due to the reasons outlined in this paper, calling wrestling "fake" has been a clear criticism of professional wrestling. Fake for the sake of being fake is not the same as depicting a level of existence otherwise unattainable; for instance, operatic heroes and heroines sing after death. Since singing after death is physically impossible, wrestling does not normally break such laws of reality. Instead, wrestlers are "fake," in the sense that they are entertainers. By recognizing itself and all entertainment as "fake," wrestling reappropriates its cultural status as a con and proudly exalts the performance ability of the performers and the ability of the plots to engage audiences across the world. For these reasons, and for better or for worse, wrestling is often considered to be "sooo fake."

# CHAPTER II: Mass Entertainment: An Athletic Dramatic Narrative

## INTRODUCTION

In both senses of the word, professional wrestling is mass entertainment -- big bodies of mass entertain the masses. Ignoring its low cultural status, looking past its elusive history, and stripping away the multitude of genres it resembles, professional wrestling is a culturally significant form of entertainment. Humans enjoy playing, in sport, in theater, or in both; likewise, humans enjoying viewing others at play, in athletics, in entertainment, or in both. Wrestling is both and more, being an athletic dramatic narrative. Athletically, wrestling builds upon the thrill of the ancestral hunt, maximizing the agon, alea, ilinx, and mimicry of games. Most importantly, wrestling's thrill ride is characterized by moments of viewing shock/surprise. This shock delivers the adrenalin of the ancestral fight for survival in a safe and entertaining way. As for its dramatics, professional wrestling does not use athletic competition as sport does, to determine a clear winner; rather, wrestling uses its athletic competition for mythic ritual. Stemming from and balancing its function as moral ritual, wrestling is also a carnivalesque spectacle of sorts, a semi-participatory celebration and exploration of bodily pleasure and excess, without stringent social or moral constants. Along with its dramatic function as ritual and carnival, wrestling is a television serial melodrama, embodying such basic soap opera traits as continuity, intimacy, domesticity, timeliness, fragmentation, repetition, and suspense. The mythic undertones of ritual and the semi-participatory fervour of carnival feed into wrestling's melodrama; however, wrestling's excessive performance style often leads to tragic

excess and comic camp. Ultimately organizing wrestling's athletic and dramatic entertainment while maximizing television's power as an advertising medium, wrestling's covert and overt narrative voice. Thus, anchored by delivering thrilling moments of shock/surprise in its viewers, professional wrestling entertains the masses through three general means: athletics, dramatics, and narration.

In the first section, wrestling athletics will be analyzed in depth. Wrestling will be situated as a physical storytelling version of the classical plot paradigm. Then, the relation between plot, character, and match styles will be explained. Likened to short stories, wrestling matches will be shown to build to a final climax; the relation of the number three to athletic storytelling will be addressed; then, the advantages of physical storytelling over other storytelling forms will be illustrated. Next, the connection between our basic appeal for sport and our corresponding attraction to wrestling will be established. Combat will be argued as a more engaging and adrenalin-pumping form of entertainment than autotelic activities. The survival instinct will be shown to fuel our attraction to athletics and then wrestling will be shown to maximize the emotional and visceral thrill of sports by resembling the indeterminacy and risk of live athletic contests. Then, wrestling's ability to delight through athletics will be related to Caillois' four main categories of games (agon, alea, ilinx, and mimicry). Ilinx will be established as wrestling's principle of recognition; that is, just as pity and fear are aroused in viewers of Greek tragedy, moments of astonishment is aroused in viewers of wrestling. Then, the function of wrestling's athletics will be distinguished from that of sporting contests. Then, it will be argued that professional wrestling is a logical outgrowth of the ancestral fight for survival and amateur-style wrestling.

In the second section, wrestling's function as drama will be dealt with in three parts. One, wrestling's role as mythic dramatic ritual will be established through an articulation of wrestling's central working class myth. Two, wrestling's limited form of the carnivalesque will be explained. Simply, the carnivalesque allows for a limited amount of audience participation, allowing wrestling's mythic role to be more accessible and enjoyable for fans. Next, Caillois' notion of ilinx (of overcoming vertigo and shocking oneself out of the moral order) will be passingly related to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque (upending rules and norms). Then, the limited role of the carnivalesque in wrestling will be illustrated, followed by examples of wrestling's ability for fan influence on plot and character development. Since there is a blurring of boundaries between the wrestler's private identity and public "performing" identity, the hyperreal persona of wrestling performers will also be addressed. Three, the serial melodramatic element of wrestling programming will be explored. Wrestling's parallel with the basic soap opera characteristics of continuity, intimacy, domesticality, timeliness, interruption, repetition, and suspense will be dealt with. Since wrestling's melodramatic performance style is often over-the-top, the element of tragic excess and comic camp will finish the section.

In the third section, wrestling's narrative voice will be examined. Wrestling's covert narrative, which includes filming/staging techniques, will be covered first. Then, the basic narrative structure of a program in terms of bringing the show to an ending which embodies both closure and continuity will be explained. Next, wrestling's overt narrative will be dealt with in detail. The primacy of sound stimuli over visual stimuli in television will be established. Then, television will be situated as mass culture's oral storytelling medium. Wrestling

then will be compared to oral tales in the way they may stabilize, conserve, or challenge common ideological beliefs. In order to understand the central role of the announcer in wrestling's overt narrative, Aristotle's *Poetics* will be flipped upside down; so, the Aristotle's elements of spectacle, melody, language, thought, character, and plot will be dealt with in reverse order. Finally, the announcer's threefold role to accent the action, recognize the moment, and function within an entertainment team will be explained. Overall then, by delivering thrilling moments of shock/surprise, professional wrestling entertains through athletics, dramatics, and narration.

## ATHLETIC ENTERTAINMENT

### Physical Storytelling

Most identifiable by wrestling bouts, wrestling is physical storytelling, a stunt combat spectacle of struggling bodies in conflict. Part choreography and part improvisation, the match is a performance spectacle of violent athletic conflict personifying and modifying the basic elements of a short story. In a match, each wrestler is one another's antagonist. Any wrestler's fundamental goal is the same, to secure a win by submission, pinfall, or in some cases, humiliation and injury. One wrestler serves as the ongoing obstacle for the other, using moves and counter-moves as the complication. Ideally, a match is paced so that it reaches a climactic finish and quick denouement or a climactic finish that is the denouement, resembling the classical plot paradigm. In *Understanding Movies*, Giannetti describes film's use of the classical paradigm in the following way:

> The classical paradigm emphasizes dramatic unity, plausible motivation, and coherence of its constituent parts. Each shot is seamlessly elided to the next in an effort to produce a smooth flow of action, and often a sense of inevitability. To add urgency to the conflict, filmmakers sometimes include some kind of deadline, thus intensifying the emotion. (203)

The professional wrestling match emphasizes dramatic unity, plausible motivation, and coherence as well; however, the seamless shots in wrestling are more literally punches, kicks, and other such "shots." This physical action may be filmed with rapid editing to heighten dramatic impact, but most usually a tracking camera simply observes the action; hence, the wrestlers are left to provide the sense of authenticity. Since they must convince and engage the live arena audience, the onus is on the athletic performers to deliver the verisimilitude of violence, leaving the director and the television cameras to simply capture and possibly heighten the sense of verisimilitude. Such a performer-centered form of entertainment connects wrestling with the liveness and immediacy of television's Golden Age of live dramatic performances. Hence, there is an "authenticity" of performance which ties into the live television dramas of the fifties; that is, the wrestler's performance relies on dynamics more related to live theater than recorded television broadcasts (which allow for greater directorial control and editing). As with dance then, in wrestling, semi-choreographed human anatomy is author.

Through the grammar of a physical story, bouts help articulate plot and character. The opening of a wrestling match can be ab ovo or in medias res. With ab ovo, the bell rings, and then the two wrestlers fight. This type of opening is typical of the more fair matches, the routine matches, the matches that have a

reluctant competitor, and so on. When a plot's passions are more uncontrollable, the physical stories begin in the middle of the action. With in medias res, the wrestlers are already quarreling and then the bell rings, and sometimes they may not even be near a wrestling ring. In either case, the fighting ensues and, like a typical story, there are twists and turns. In wrestling however, the physical plot's twists and turns correspond to the literal twists and turns of the physical action. For example, a wrestler may slap on an agonizing submission hold, where the victimized wrestler can lose the match by giving up to the inquiring referee. Here, the inner strength of the wrestler is being tested. If the tortured wrestler summons up the motivation and makes it to the ring rope (so the torturer must break the hold) or if the tortured wrestler escapes or reverses the submission hold, then that tortured wrestler has shown heart, determination, and skill. If the tortured cheats to get out of the hold or gives up, a lack of courage, a lack of experience, or a lack of faith in the imperishable inner self is shown, defining the wrestler as weak/fearful, as a coward, or as a villain. Nonetheless, a hero can display villainous or cowardly traits in the physical story and still be a hero if justified in some way. For instance, being emotionally outraged, a hero has license to ignore the rules and cheat to enact revenge. Or, being injured, a hero may give up in a submission hold. Likewise, a villain may display sportsmanlike traits in the physical story if justified. Thus, any single match can be comprised of such tests of character; consequently, a series of matches come to define the wrestler as a hero or a villain. Fundamentally then, plot and character are communicated through the visual grammar of combat.

As in a short story, there are limitations in the number of characters and in the duration of matches. In wrestling, the average minimum is three characters,

consisting of at least two wrestlers in a fight mediated by a single referee. Like a short story, television wrestling matches are limited pieces, meant to be viewed in one sitting, or typically between only one and maybe two commercial breaks. The time limit of a television match is usually set at ten minutes and the wrestlers try to finish the bout and declare a clear winner in such time. Like the literary/film device of the time bomb counting down, the longer a match continues under such a time constraint, the more exciting the action becomes. Ultimately, the climax is reached when one of the wrestlers successfully administers his or her signature move. A signature move is a wrestler's favorite or most lethal form of attack. A wrestler can have more than one signature move on which to finish a match. At times, a wrestler may even surprise audiences and deliver a new or unexpected finishing move. Whatever the case, the wrestler delivers a key move at a crucial point in the momentum of the physical action. (As in sports, this is a "key play" that may be likened to the pivotal pass pattern in a football or basketball team). A strong finishing move is a wrestler's "key play." A smartly-delivered finishing move displays the wrestler's physical and intellectual ability, proving that he or she knows when and how to attack and seal a victory. Following the climax, the denouement occurs when the victimized wrestler gives up in a submission hold/knockout position or is pinned for three counts. For submission holds, the wrestler either gives up willingly/verbally or has his or her hand raised three times by the referee. If a wrestler cannot keep his or her hand raised on the third lift, then the match is lost. If the wrestler is knocked out, then his or her hand is lifted and dropped three times, officially signifying the loss. A pinfall is pinning the opponent's shoulders to the mat for a count of three. At times, with equally balanced wrestlers, the final three count victory is the surprising climactic ending.

It is surprising, because the wrestlers are equally balanced competitors and neither has the clear advantage throughout the bout. So, the match goes back and forth, coming to near-falls for both wrestlers. Each wrestler may even escape from the other's signature move and previous pinfall attempts. Hence, the final pinfall comes as a surprise and thus saves the climax, the third slap of the referee's hand against the canvas, for the very end. In essence, a limited cast of characters grace the stage, delivering suspenseful physical story-lines.

The number three is crucial to the physicalized storytelling. The minimum number of participants is three, the maximum times a hand is raised in a submission hold is three, and at the opening of a match, the bell is rapidly struck three times. Like any story a match consists of three basic parts, the beginning, the middle, and the end. It is uncertain as to why this tripartite structure is so prevalent in the pacing of our literary, cinematic, or physical stories, but its presence is certain. Even in a slow sport like baseball, it takes three strikes to be out, there are three bases to run around, and there are nine innings (three sets of three). In wrestling, the number three conjures up a convention of oral/fairy tales, such as the three wishes. In terms of entertaining pacing, it seems that two is much too brief to build the proper suspense and four is much too long, dragging out matters. So, three is ideal. And no where is this more evident in wrestling than in its final three-count pinfall. Modifying the one-count pinfall in amateur wrestling, wrestling's three count pinfall is more satisfying in physical storytelling terms. Hence, a professional wrestling pinfall consists of one wrestler pinning another wrestler's shoulders to the mat for three full counts. Signifying the completion of a match, the referee counts while loudly slapping the mat, "One, two, . . . three!" An athleticized spectacle of the classical paradigm and three-act story structure, the

professional wrestling match builds its entertainment through physicalized storytelling techniques.

Being a physical version of storytelling provides wrestling with several advantages over print, oral, or even film media. In fact, wrestling even has an advantage over dance; that is, music is not essential. Also, in dances which tell stories, the movements are stylized and thus require some interpretation. In wrestling, fans do interpret according to story, character, and codes such as hand-signals. Hence, wrestling's physical action does have varied layers of interpretive possibilities. However, on a fundamental level, the spectacle of violence between two individuals is understood as a conflict. Hence, viewers without any knowledge of wrestling, can still engage in the dramatic athletic battle. In other words, despite all other narratively-based or character-based interpretations, the meaning of a bite is understood by audiences around the world. Viewers do not have to know any specific language to comprehend a punch or a kick; the impact of a move is direct and visceral. Not needing to be distilled through pages of print or lines of oration, the action is immediate and visual. Films are visual as well, but even silent films had intertitles that had to be read. Moreover, films lack the immediacy and convenience of television. To enjoy a wrestling match, a viewer simply has to turn on his or her home television set. Despite such technical advantages over other media however, wrestling's main attractive force stems from the spectator's own biological instinct to survive. For viewers, the central impetus in wrestling is survival. It is the biological urge to survive that charges the chess-like quality of well-performed bouts and it is survival that serves to energize all of those character conflicts from week to week. Ultimately then, professional wrestling's association with physical combat allows viewers to vicariously ignite

the innate biological instinct for survival in a (wrestling) world full of dangerous and threatening forces.

**Biological Appeal**

To understand the role of biological instinct in our appreciation of wrestling's violent spectacle, the basic appeal of sport must be looked into. Cashmore in *Making Sense* believes competitive sports derive from our ancestral survival skills. When the hunting-gathering age was replaced by the agricultural age, Cashmore argues that sport replaced hunting: "Sport was the result of the attempt to reintroduce the excitement and thrill of the hunt into lives that were threatened with mundane routines in unchallenging environments" (56). Whether sport existed before the agricultural age is open to debate, since it is quite possible that even prehistoric tribes held contests to test their athletic and mental prowess. Nonetheless, to illustrate his argument of sport as an organized social entertainment event, Cashmore uses the following example and explanation:

> The use of the bow is interesting in that it stimulated the construction of an artifact, the target, the bull's eye, which as its name implies, represented the part of the animal to be aimed at. Archery, as a purely autotelic behavior, actually had the quality of compressing a symbolic hunt into a finite area and allowing a precise way of assessing the results. As such, it had potential as an activity that could be watched and evaluated by others, who would not participate except in a vicarious way (that is, they might experience it imaginatively through the participants -- which is what most sports spectators do, even today). (56)

For Cashmore, sport emerges as a manifestation of the ancestral skills required to attain food or survive in the wild and sport is entertaining because viewers vicariously experience the dynamics of the ancestral hunt. Archery is an autotelic sport, an activity which has an end or purpose in itself. An autotelic activity can be competitive, as an archery contest is. However, the battle is not immediate and direct. One archer fires an arrow and then the other archer fires an arrow. The one closest to the bull's-eye is declared the winner. A viewer watches for the skill involved in hitting a target, and the viewer's vicarious enjoyment is enhanced if he or she follows the sport and understands its difficulty, or even better, has experienced the sport and knows how difficult it is. So, an autotelic activity can effectively entertain a spectator; however, direct competition more easily involves the onlooker, regardless of the spectator's comprehension of the complexity or difficulty of the sport. Of course, a viewer's entertainment is enhanced if a sport's nuances are understood; nevertheless, because of the inherent dramatic conflict, direct competition draws the viewer in more easily and more thoroughly than autotelic contests.

Combat is a form of direct competition between at least two individuals, raising the complexity and the stakes of an autotelic activity. A static target cannot move or fire an arrow back at the archer; so, add in a moving target board, or better yet, allow two archers to fire at one another and, because of such spectacular dramatic conflict, the sport will most likely attract mass television audiences. Sheer one-on-one conflict between two combatants heightens the dramatic involvement of the spectator and thus heightens the spectator's vicarious enjoyment. Continuing with the vicarious viewing pleasure of sport, Cashmore explains:

> This vicariousness was, as we now realize, absolutely crucial to the emergence and development of sport. The facility for bringing the rationality and emotion of a hunt to a home base made it possible to include dozens, or hundreds, of people in the whole experience. Just witnessing an event offered some continuity, however tenuous, within change: spectators could "feel" the drama and tension of supposed hunt from another age, through the efforts of the participants. (57)

Rather than a simple demonstration of superior skill, pitting two individuals against one another allows for a personalization of the struggle. Spectators can take sides, identify with their favorite, and cathartically despise the combatant they hate. Aside from all this, competitive sports maximize the spectator's identification with the biological will to live, to survive. If a viewer enjoys the skill of an autotelic activity like archery because it harkens back to our urge to hunt on the prehistoric savanna, then a directly competitive activity like fighting more fully exploits such biological urges.

Athletic competition is the social institution in which Darwin's evolutionary adage "survival of the fittest" echoes today. With limited food supplies and an abundance of environmental threats, such as predators, or the existence of biological limitations, such as strength, speed, and intelligence, a living creature strives for self-preservation. In other words, living creatures strive to continue living for as long as possible within their environment and according to their biological capabilities. This basic urge serves as the basis of competition; the primitive drives associated with such competition are conjured by modern athletic competition in order to vicariously involve the spectator. Other spectator

motivations are necessary, such as national pride, social allegiance and so on, but biological motivation prefigures and feeds into the other learned or culturally-based motivations. Thus, athletic competition engages spectators because competition builds upon the human survival instinct. In other words, biological instinct imbues our attraction to athletic entertainment.

The term "sports" entertainment has the most credence when referring to wrestling's overall athletic guise. Wrestling maximizes the emotional and visceral impact of sports, by resembling the indeterminacy and risk of live athletic contests. Hence, usually aired or at least filmed live, wrestling broadcasts aim to enhance the atmosphere of indeterminacy traditionally associated with sports. In other words, professional wrestling utilizes the markers that identify a live sporting event in order to attract viewers to the similar tone of live excitement in wrestling. As Jenkins says in "Never Trust a Snake," "Wrestling adopts the narrative and thematic structures implicit within traditional sports and heightens them to insure the maximum emotional impact" (9). As for being a live broadcast, Boddy cites Seldes in *Fifties Television* by saying that live broadcasts bring a vitality to the viewing experience that, along with the technological immediacy of the medium, provides an "overwhelming feel of reality" (84). Like a sports broadcast, wrestling programs are presented so as to make the viewer feel intimately involved with the action as it progresses, moment by moment. Moreover, since not only performance and live documentary-style coverage are involved, but also high risk stunts, the ever-looming possibility that something may go wrong adds to the dynamic vitality of the show. The athletic action itself must approach a type of performance hyperrealism. As Fiske defines it in *Media Matters*, hyperreality "accounts for our loss of certainty in being able to distinguish clearly and

hierarchically between reality and its representation, and in being able to distinguish clearly and hierarchically between the modes of its representation" (62). So, the more authentic the athletic action appears or the more daring the athletic action is, the greater the visceral impact. Wrestling fans are swept away by the physical action's daring choreography in much the same way viewers are astounded by the remarkable feats of film stars such as Buster Keaton or Jackie Chan. Keaton's and Chan's stunts attract us, because although planned, the risk is authentic, and as a consequence, they require a great deal of skill and courage to properly execute. In television wrestling, a similar sort of amazed appreciation constitutes the viewer's thrill; we are swept away by the proper execution of dangerous athletic stunts. Furthermore, this amazed appreciation of fans is essentially a type of pleasurable shock. To be discussed more clearly throughout the rest of this paper, pleasurable shock is wrestling's principle of recognition, the fundamental basis of wrestling's visceral enjoyment. Therefore, building off the sport contest's indeterminacy and the high risk of live performance, wrestling's guise as sports maximizes its emotional and visceral impact on spectators.

Basically then, professional wrestling exploits the excitement inherent in athletics. To understand more clearly how wrestling does this, Caillois' four main categories of games must be briefly addressed. Caillois' categorization system of agon, alea, ilinx, and mimicry help connect the pleasurable functions of human play in general with wrestling's specific ability to maximize audience delight through athletics. Whereas the social dimension may be fraught with inequalities (such as class, nation, or gender), agon is fair competition between adversaries on a level playing field. For many societies, agon is the escape from social inequalities, where all competitors are equally capable of proving themselves. As Caillois in

*Man, Play, and Games* says, agon "leaves the champion to his own devices, to evoke the best possible game of which he is capable, and it obliges him to play the game within fixed limits, and according to the rules applied equally to all, so that in return the victor's superiority will be beyond dispute" (15). So, the pleasure of agon is fair competition, exemplified by fair professional wrestling matches, but utilized as the basis of every match and story-line. This is wrestling's appropriation of a culturally sacred space, the level-laying field. Even though most matches are not fair, the ring space, the role of the referee, and the sport-like atmosphere are all intended to evoke an atmosphere of agon, the fair competition. Hence, because sports are the cultural sanctuary for fair competition, when things in wrestling are not fair, they have meaning and evoke protest from the audience.

The opposite of agon is alea or games of chance. The pleasure of alea also stems from a level playing field; that is, all of the participants can be equally affected by chance. Caillois explains in the following manner, saying alea designates:

> all games that are based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary . . . Here, not only does one refrain from trying to eliminate the injustice of chance, but rather it is the very capriciousness of chance that constitutes the unique appeal of the game. (17)

In wrestling story-lines, chance figures prominently in either positive or negative ways. For instance, an overlooked wrestler may be given the chance of a lifetime and battle a champion. Or, as is often the case, a villainous wrestler may garner

wins by being lucky enough to frequently dupe referees and get away with cheating and winning. So, alea in wrestling is an extension of the notion that anything can happen to anyone at any particular moment.

Ilinx is associated with the effort to overcome, survive, or experience physical or psychological vertigo. Caillois says ilinx is "based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind." Illustrating ilinx by referring to Depont and Coppolani's *Les confreries religieuses musulmanes*, Caillois explains that "Dervishes seek ecstasy by whirling about with movements accelerating as the drumbeats become ever more precipitate. Panic and hypnosis are attained by the paroxysm of frenetic, contagious, and shared rotation" (23). The rhythmic action enthralls the audience, who, in a sense, become mesmerized themselves. Caillois refers to tight-rope walking as a prime example of ilinx, where the performer tries to overcome vertigo, delighting audiences because of the skill and focus required to survive such risk. Performing a wrestling show can be an actual gamble, leading to serious injury/death, or if well-executed, to respect and fame. Ilinx, however, is not simply a domain of the performer; viewers experience the physical shock of ilinx, which is the primary spirit of wrestling's athletic entertainment.

This is wrestling's principle of recognition. Just as pity and fear are to be aroused in viewers of Greek tragedy, moments of astonishment are to be aroused in viewers of professional wrestling. Shocking spectacle defines the fundamental spirit of wrestling as entertainment. Risky and realistic violence causes audiences to cringe in fear and amazement. The alarmed gasp of an audience is a collective form of ilinx and an indicator that wrestling has fulfilled its goal as athletic

entertainment. For a brief moment, the audience is in a state of panic, disrupting their normal viewing state. Such panic parallels the screaming patrons of a roller coaster ride, and similarly is a controlled means of experiencing biological fear. Closely associated with the survival instinct, the fear conjured through viewing violent conflict completes wrestling's aim. In an indirect and safe manner, the fear, panic, and shock associated originally with being involved in a fight for one's life is achieved safely through vicariously experiencing the shocking spectacle of violence. Hence, not only are the performers overcoming vertigo, but audiences are also swept away by moments of vertigo, of gasping panic. Moreover, wrestling's drama and narration are also built around moments of ilinx, highlighting story shock and surprise. Thus, the central principle in wrestling's athletic entertainment is to invoke such moments of panic/shock through risky and realistic violence which feeds into the story surprises performed in wrestling's drama and expressed in wrestling's narration.

Being a performance of competition, wrestling is mimetic agon, open to alea and anchored by the central spirit of ilinx. Explaining mimicry, Caillois says: "All play presupposes the temporary acceptance, if not an illusion (indeed this last word means nothing less than beginning a game: *in-lusio*), then at least of a closed, conventional, and, in certain respects, imaginary universe" (19). As mentioned earlier, the wrestling ring marks off a culturally recognized space of play, a closed field where fair and authentic competition is meant to take place. Distinguishing mimesis from sport, Caillois says in theater: "The pleasure lies in being or passing for another. But in games the basic intention is not that of deceiving the spectators . . . It is only the spy and the fugitive who disguise themselves to really deceive because they are not playing" (21). According to

Caillois, all competitive sporting events are participatory spectacles of mimicry in the sense that

> the simulation is now transferred from the participants to the audience. It is not the athletes who mimic, but the spectators. Identification with the champion in itself constitutes mimicry related to that of the reader with the hero of the novel and that of the moviegoer with the film star . . . The nature of these spectacles remains that of an *agon*, but their outward aspect is that of an exhibition. The audience are not content to encourage the efforts of the athletes or horses of their choice merely by voice and gesture. A physical contagion leads them to assume the position of the men or animals in order to help them, just as the bowler is known to unconsciously incline his body in the direction that he would like the bowling ball to take at the end of its course. Under these conditions, paralleling the spectacle, a competitive mimicry is born in the public, which doubles the true *agon* of the field or track. (22)

The participatory element of wrestling will be discussed more thoroughly later, when referring to wrestling's dramatic function as mythic ritual, carnival, and melodrama. Nonetheless, it is apparent here that the athletic entertainment of wrestling builds upon the vicarious involvement of sports spectators. Wrestling action aims to involve its viewers viscerally, to get audiences caught up in the rhythm and intensity. Basically, the mimetic aspect of wrestling is twofold: one, since professional wrestling is not agon, but mimetic agon, the performers themselves are playing; two, the audience are mimetic in their vicarious identification with the characters and the action. Overall then, the various forms of human play (agon, alea, ilinx, and mimicry) are evident in professional wrestling's

aim to entertain through athletics. Vicariously involving viewers by invoking the biological urge to survive, professional wrestling is mimetic agon with an atmosphere of alea (where anything can happen), anchored by the spirit of ilinx, (where viewers are shocked by moments of spectacular athletics, drama, and narration).

In essence, the indeterminacy and risk of wrestling offset the predictability and lack of risk inherent in choreography and artificial violence. The more the risk, the more courageous, dedicated, and thrilling the performer appears; thus, in a round-about sort of way, the performative values and the competitive atmosphere originally gleaned from viewing legitimate sporting contests are reiterated through wrestling's artifice. Stripping away the undramatic elements of sport, wrestling is "fake" athletic competition that nonetheless reflects the same performative values as legitimate sport, such as speed, strength, and skilled performance. Wrestling turns sport into an entertainment that praises athletic skill and the cultural values associated with sport, such as focus, determination, dedication, hard work, and heart. Thus, with the attempt to maximize the emotional impact associated with competitive athletics, wrestling gives us competitive sport as performance art. Ultimately though, since the skilled performance of athletics becomes a skilled performance in an entertainment sense of the word performance, wrestling does not simply praise the competitive inequality that is demonstrated by sport; rather, wrestling applauds the effort and energy put into the performance itself.

**The Roots of Professional Wrestling**

Basically, wrestling's transformation from a legitimate sporting contest into a physical drama is an extension of its original role as an organized athletic performance of more serious instinctive violence. In cultures around the world, wrestling is an ancient and well-respected competitive sport. In other words, wrestling is a socially-sanctioned form of more serious violent combat; wrestling is an organized culture's means of harnassing primitive survival urges in a life-affirming way. As cultural ideologies became more organized around the value of life, competition to the death was replaced by sport, especially wrestling. Hence, even the bloody gladiatorial spectacles of ancient Rome eventually gave way to more humane forms of competition (for humans at least, since illegal animal fights and legal bullfights still exist). As a sport, wrestling is competitive combat, but rules are set in place to ensure that no serious injury is incurred. According to Caillois' classification of games in *Man, Play, and Games*, such friendly competition is an agon, where "a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph" (14). Caillois goes on to explain that "the goal of the encounters is not for the antagonist to cause serious injury to his rival, but rather to demonstrate his own superiority" (16). In fact, many of the moves in amateur wrestling can be painful, but they themselves are simply a performative display to garner points. To illustrate, consider the fireman's carry. A fireman's carry is a basic wrestling move that has one wrestler lift another wrestler onto his or her shoulder so as to flip them onto the mat. A slam can be done in a more vicious way, but the fireman's carry is a safe way to flip someone over without injuring either wrestler. In a sense then, the sport of wrestling is an athleticized distillation of more violent combat.

Thus, its full progression into the professional wrestling of today is a logical extension of the performative aspects inherent in the sport. Looked at historically, television's professional wrestling is the third act in the development of one-on-one combat. Assuming that the most decisive form of violent combat ends in death, the sport of wrestling can be seen as a tame version of the fight-to-the-death; wrestling turns the fight-to-the-death into a sport, where a loss can be a "fictional" death of sorts, an admission of one's lack of prowess, skill, and ability. Consequently, in amateur-style wrestling, the moves and points scored become representative of that wrestler's skill at performing in serious combat, without incurring injury or death.

Being a more sportsmanlike version of the fight-for-life did not diminish wrestling's cultural or symbolic importance. In fact, historically, wrestling has enjoyed a very high, if not the highest, status of any sport in several cultures around the world, including Greece, Japan, and India. Wrestling was the climactic final event in the ancient Olympic decathlon and the cultural/symbolic significance of Japan's Sumo is still being kept alive. Held in great esteem, sumo wrestlers represent ancient cultural and spiritual beliefs. Wrestlers embodied the highest values of these cultures, particularly evident in terms of heroics and masculinity. For instance, Alter explains *The Wrestler's Body* that in India wrestling is a way of life, encompassing the ideal physical, psychological, and spiritual qualities of a human being:

> For a wrestler, wrestling and all it entails is an ideology, a partial and incomplete but nevertheless holistic ordering of the world. At the locus of this ideology is the identity of the wrestler -- what it

> means, among other things, to be strong, skillful, celibate, devoted, dutiful, honest, and humble. (19)

This is merely a glimpse into one culture's ancient ideal of the wrestler, the embodiment and union of physical, mental, and moral strength. In ancient cultures the sport of wrestling came to reflect the ideals and ideology of that culture and thus wrestling reached its peak as an honourable athletic ritual.

Therefore, as societies became organized around life-affirming values, vicious battles to the death between humans diminished in favour of the socially-sanctioned form of performative violence, wrestling as a sport. If wrestling turns the fight-to-the-death into a socially-sanctioned performance of athletic moves and skills, then professional wrestling simply extends this development and maximizes the sport's performance qualities. Thus, the impromptu fight on the prehistoric savanna turns into the organized gladiatorial fight-to-the-death, which turns into wrestling as a highly-valued cultural sport, which turns into the amateur-style sport, which finally evolves into the professional wrestling of today, wrestling as an athletic dramatic narrative.

## DRAMATIC ENTERTAINMENT

### Wrestling as Mythic Ritual Drama

There is a significant difference between its origin as sincere competition and its present existence as drama: professional wrestling utilizes the means of sport, not the end. Wrestling utilizes the various dramatic elements of competition in order to provide exciting athletic entertainment. Authentic competition begins with adversaries on a level-playing field as equals, but ends in an inequality

between the players, evident through the ranking of a victor and a loser. In "TV's World of Sports," Reeves declares:

> Widely condemned as "false" or "pseudo" sport, television pro wrestling constantly challenges the ideal of free and open competition. In a sport without statistics, the win-loss percentage of a wrestling star is not relevant knowledge. In wrestling it's how one plays the game that truly counts: a hero in defeat is still heroic; a villain triumphant is still to be despised. And in this privileging of character at the expense of authenticity, pro wrestling lampoons the naive ideals associated with the winner-take-all justice of the competition ethic. Pro wrestling champions a much richer brand of justice -- a justice from character, not conquest. (*Television Studies*, 212).

In this sense, wrestling is closer to ritual drama than sport. Levi-Strauss in "The Science of the Concrete," articulates the difference between sports and ritual:

> Games thus appear to have a *disjunctive* effect: they end in the establishment of a difference between individual players or teams where originally there was no indication of inequality. And at the end of the game they are distinguished into winners and losers. Ritual, on the other hand, is the exact inverse; it *conjoins*, for it brings about a union . . . . (*Ritual, Play, and Performance*, 75)

Meaning in wrestling stems from its totality, the function of each character in relation to another. They are routinely enacting a working class myth, where heart makes the hero. Hence, while the performance aspect in wrestling can be seen as a humane distillation of the ancestral battle to survive, this mythic function of

wrestling's drama can be traced back to such forms as the morality plays, as ancient Greek theater, and even religious rituals. In *Illuminating Shadows*, Hill explains:

> From the most ancient times drama has had its roots in myth and religion. Primitive peoples have always enacted their religious devotion in song, dance, and play. As civilization advanced, so too did theater. In the golden age of Greek drama, the poets, actors, and directors were all considered ministers of religion during the drama festivals. The plays were designed to interpret life rather than escape from it. (11-12)

Hence, dramatic or religious rituals were a means of sharing, developing, and modifying a collective ideology. Esslin in *An Anatomy of Drama* explains that "in ritual as in drama the aim is an enhanced level of consciousness, a memorable insight into the nature of existence, a renewal of strength in the individual to face the world" (28). In such an interpretive manner, professional wrestling's ritual drama organizes a working class understanding of the world and a way to cope with reality. Thus, even though its television audiences are diverse (in terms of class, but also age and gender), the working class myth still holds the primary place in wrestling's function as drama.

**Wrestling's Central Working-Class Myth**

Building off Freedman, at the center of wrestling's ritual drama is a working-class myth articulating the struggle to survive as an honest and hard working individual in a world full of injustice, temptation, and unfairness. In *Drawing Heat*, Freedman insists: "Fans see in the show a sham of tests of skill and

enterprise in general that suburbanites of North American society hold sacred. They have heard how free competition means democracy, means fairness, opportunity and social justice and they know it isn't so" (23). Variants of this central theme make up the differing wrestling scripts; however, the locus is that of the individual's striving for success. Like the original working-class viewers, wrestlers rely on their bodies to make their living. Hence, bouts are representative of the daily toil to which the body is subject to. Certainly damaging, often dangerous, physical work is essential to working class survival. Moreover, North American culture reiterates the belief that such hard work leads to success; this is the Horatio Alger story, the notion that one can rise in class, wealth, and prestige, from one of the working masses, a nobody, to one of the successful, a somebody. Hence, the wrestler toils physically. For instance, consider Mick Foley's autobiography. Foley's career-full of battle scars are accounted for throughout the text and graphically displayed on the back cover. In essence, Foley's battered body is a proud reminder of his physical toil and dedication. Hence, the wrestler's physical toil parallels the pain and pride associated with the working man's or working woman's life of physical toil.

Unfortunately, the world is not fair. Because of unfair authority figures, threatening enemies, and persistent temptation, hard work does not equal success. Referees are notoriously blind to the antics of cheating wrestlers, leaving the fair-player down for the count. Rich wrestling bosses exploit their talent, eroding sculpted physiques into grotesque clumps. Vince McMahon in the WWF and Eric Bischoff in the WCW have played just such an exploitative wrestling boss in the late 1990s. Since it is a family business, Vince McMahon has even incorporated the help of his son Shane and daughter Stephanie. At different times, either one of

the McMahons, a combination of the two, or all of the McMahons have represented the exploitative boss character. (Vince McMahon's wife Linda has participated in wrestling story lines as well, but she has not played the evil boss. In fact, being the maternal figure, she plays the nicest and most fair of the company owners thus far). Eric Bischoff became the extremely powerful boss in WCW/NWO, by presenting himself as the official head of WCW and the brains behind the NWO gang. The NWO were trying to take over WCW and so, with Bischoff's high corporate status, the NWO was able to wield a great deal of power over the organization. In essence, the elite promoters become richer and richer, while the hard-working athletes must prove themselves again and again, each and every match. Even if the legendary wrestlers become rich, they still must prove themselves physically; that is, their money does not necessarily buy them an easier, less physically damaging life. Although there are corrupted champions who display the easy life by scarcely defending their championship belt; or if corrupted champions must defend their title, they do so against easy opponents, they may cheat in some manner, or they may disqualify themselves so they can maintain the title, but officially lose the match. Nonetheless, even the rich and legendary champions must prove themselves afresh with each new match. For instance, although WCW's Ric Flair plays and is a wealthy performer, he still commits himself to many of his matches. Flair does not have to attain the American dream, because he already has it. However, he does not shy away from wrestling contests; that is, he still proves himself through physical toil. So, unfair authority figures exploit the hard-working talent, but even accomplished champions may prove their dedication to the values of hard work by still risking their bodies long after they have attained the American dream.

Threatening enemies come in many shapes and sizes, including genetic monsters, insincere managers, unfaithful spouses, arrogant foreigners, and backstabbing friends/family. Even if a wrestler makes it to the top and becomes champion, the power and glory can corrupt. Social and material temptation abound, so wrestlers often "sell-out." Forgetting the value of honest work, they give up decent values in exchange for gang affiliations and elite/enemy alliances. After over a decade of playing the decent hero, Hogan was finally corrupted when he turned over to the NWO. Hence, in wrestling, power corrupts. Specifically, social and material power corrupts the natural physically-based self, where emotions are pure and the belief in hard work, if even naive, persists. Hence, the heroic power of the wrestler stems from the inner self, not the outer world. It is determination, skill, experience, faith, courage, and heart, especially heart, that defines the hero. For instance, after eight years of concerted effort, WCW's Booker T became world heavyweight champion in 2000. His path to the top was paved with hard work and heart, evident in one of his catch-phrases, "Save the drama for your mamma." Reiterating the importance of physical toil over dramatic monologues and costume through such a catch-phrase, Booker T represents the underdog achieving success through physical capability and effort. Thus, intrinsic to the ritual myth of wrestling drama is a working-class morality, where one must survive the pains of an unfair world, where one must beware of corruption, where one must remain faithful to a life of honest work, drawing strength from the inner self.

**Wrestling as the Carnivalesque and Myth**

Stemming from and balancing out this moral basis is the carnivalesque theater of wrestling, a safety-valve for the seriousness of mythic participation. Building off of the physical shock caused by ilinx, the carnivalesque is a shock to the social and moral order. The working-class myth explains the world in an organized manner. In *Understanding Popular Culture* Fiske proclaims "Rules organize the social and the everyday and control the sense we make of it; they determine not only behaviors and judgments, but also the social categories through which we make sense of the world" (85). Wrestling does express moral virtues and it does distinguish between right and wrong. For instance, during the mid-1980s, Hulk Hogan was the ritual mythic hero. He was a better-than-average character, with a well-sculpted physique, and towering presence. Embodying simple but ethical virtues, Hogan was a role model, urging children with his famous line: "Train, say your prayers, and eat your vitamins." Like the 1950s children's television hero, Hulk Hogan advised his young fans to live healthy and socially productive lives. However, the ritual of such mythic drama is open to change, capable of adjusting with time and sentiment. As Butler says in *Myth of the Hero*, the mythic hero has the ability to establish laws, "and the concurrent right to break any of those laws" (9). The ability of myth to adjust and the hero's ability to transgress foregrounds wrestling's theater of the carnivalesque. Most directly, the simplicity of the binary opposition in myth (good versus evil) is made much more interesting through carnival. Fiske in *Understanding Popular Culture* declares:

> In carnival, categories are broken as enthusiastically as rules: the wrestlers' managers fight as often as the wrestlers, wrestlers not officially involved join in the bouts, the ropes that separate the ring (the area

> of the contest) from the audience are ignored and the fight spills into the audience, who become participants, not only verbally but sometimes physically.

Wrestling then utilizes the carnivalesque to make its role as mythic drama more accessible and acceptable. Audiences would become easily bored if wrestling was simply a series of good versus evil matches, with good triumphing. The myth would lose its meaning and relevancy; moreover, the pain of life would not be expressed and thus wrestling would lose its ability to unite a diverse array of fans through displays of suffering. Wrestling limited form of carnivalesque opens up avenues for dramatic variation and complexity, as well as allowing audiences to voice their feelings and desires.

**The Shocking Relation Between Ilinx and the Carnivalesque**

Along with myth, Caillois notion of ilinx establishes the atmosphere for carnivalesque chaos. Recalling and elaborating on ilinx, Caillois in *Man, Play, and Games* says that ilinx is produced by various activities, including tightrope walking, rapid rotation, or even banging on garbage cans. Resembling this type of physical shock, there is a shock or vertigo to the moral order:

> In parallel fashion, there is a vertigo of a moral order, a transport that suddenly seizes the individual. This vertigo is readily linked to the desire for disorder and destruction, a drive which is normally repressed. It is reflected in crude and brutal forms of personality expression . . . In adults, nothing is more revealing of vertigo than the strange excitement that is felt in cutting down the tall prairie flowers with a switch, or in creating an avalanche of the snow on a rooftop, or, better, the intoxication

> that is experienced in military barracks -- for example, in noisily banging garbage cans. (24)

Through wrestling violence, Caillois' "desire for disorder and destruction" is given an avenue of vicarious expression (24). However, fans can blur the boundary between the stage and the stands by collectively participating in this disorder and destruction to a limited extent; that is, they may chant derogatory terms, cheer for their favorites, or throw garbage at the wrestlers they hate. Ultimately, ilinx in wrestling is represented in two ways. One, the daring spectacle of physical violence is an attempt to overcome ilinx. It is this shocking spectacle that defines the most fundamental spirit of wrestling, that is, risky and realistic violence causes audiences to cringe in shock and amazement or exclaim "Whooo!." Two, the shocking gasps of the audience is in itself a collective form of ilinx. Extending upon such an opportunity to react, Caillois' notion of ilinx feeds into the Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. That is, just as ilinx is a shock to the moral order, the carnivalesque is about upending social rules and norms. Hence, there is a relation between both concepts in terms of allowing a certain level of audience participation that helps negotiate or that transcends social rules and norms. With ilinx, fans do not necessarily pound on garbage cans, but they do chant, scream, yell, and participate in such collective ways. With wrestling's limited carnivalesque, fans realize that the boundary between the spectator and the performer are blurred somewhat. So, they do not simply view wrestling; instead, they participate in and are an important part of the programming. Their collective chants, cheers, and garbage throwing upends the traditional rules of viewing live theater, allows them to voice their opinion of a persona/performer or plot/performance, and, the derogatory chants and garbage throwing at least, allows

them to participant in a limited amount disorder and destruction. In actual life or typical theater, people normally do not shout out inflammatory comments and people normally do not hurl garbage at another person or a stage performer when they feel like it. In wrestling however, people hurl both inflammatory comments and "soft" garbage, such as paper cups, pamphlets, candy bar wrappers, and other such mess. Frequently, fans repeat the catch-phrases and hand-signs of their favorite wrestlers. For instance, fans cheer along when Ric Flair or Sting cheer "Whooo!" Randy Savage chants "Oooh yeah!" and so does the audience. And an arena of onlookers voice "Do you smell what the Rock is cooking?" along with the Rock. Hence, there is a level of collective fan participation that connects the collective mental and moral vertigo of ilinx with the blurring of boundaries, the increased level of spectator participation, and the upending of social norms that are characteristic of the carnivalesque. Moreover, on live broadcasts especially, the vocal participation of the fans adds to the overall atmosphere in the excitement program. Collective fan reactions help communicate a wrestler's heroic, villainous, or silly persona. Essentially then, wrestling's limited carnivalesque stems from the participatory nature of myth and the way the vertigo of ilinx can parallel a vertigo of the moral order. And wrestling's semi-participatory element stems from both ilinx and the carnivalesque, as a limited avenue of collective fan expression.

**Limited Carnivalesque**

Carnivalesque to an extent, wrestling has many of the traits first outlined by Bakhtin. For instance, weaving Bakhtin into her argument, in *Professional Wrestling*, Mazer explains:

> Like Bakhtin's rogues, clowns, and fools, the wrestlers "create around themselves their own special little world," which is "connected with that highly specific, extremely important area of the square when the common people congregate" (*Dialogic Imagination* 159). The wrestlers are both real and not-real, in Bakhtin's words, "one cannot take them literally, because they are not what they seem . . . . Their existence is a reflection of some other's mode of being -- and even then, not a direct reflection. They are life's maskers; their being coincides with their role, and outside this role they simply do not exist" (*Dialogic Imagination* 159). (101)

As carnivalesque theater, wrestlers are their characters and their fans treat them as such. Hence, when George Raymond Wagner entered the carnival space as Gorgeous George, he is booed and hissed, the object of the audience's hate. Thus, for viewers, the carnivalesque theater of wrestling is an opportunity to participate in an escapist spectacle; fans can communally express their rage, their love, their sadness, and their joy. And often their cheers and boos help dictate the way a character develops over time, as hero or villain. As Mazer puts it in *Professional Wrestling*, wrestling is "an invitation to every participant to share in expressions of excess and to celebrate the desire for, if not acting upon, transgression against whatever cultural values are perceived as dominant and/or oppressive in everyday life" (19). The arena is "a site for sanctioned transgression of everyday properties" (35). Audience members may voice their opinions, hold up placards, and even throw garbage at hated wrestlers to express their dissatisfaction with the entertainment.

Despite such a participatory nature, wrestling's carnivalesque is clearly limited. For instance, in carnival the boundary between performer and audience is

broken down and traditional categories are destroyed. Hence, ring action spills over into the audience, managers get involved in the action, and so on. But, there is a clear limit to such transgressive participation. For instance, there is a clear boundary between performer and audience, marked by the barricade encircling the ring. Any forays into the audience are exciting and break traditional boundaries of performance space, but in wrestling such transgressive treats are mere conventions of the form. They do not necessarily break down the mimetic realm, opening the way for ideological upheaval. For instance, a fight often spills over into the audience to express the uncontrollable nature of the conflict. Narratively, the wrestlers are so "out-of-control" that they disregard the rules and fight anywhere, in bathrooms, in dressing rooms, and in the audience. In essence, this is a direct reflection of the uncontrollable antagonism between the two and has become a dramatic convention in wrestling shows, an expectation of sorts. And even when wrestlers do battle within an audience, security guards are quick to set up another boundary, however flexible, between spectators and spectacle. Security officials hold back the audience until the wrestlers make it back over the barricade and into the official ring space. Overall then, wrestling is a limited form of carnivalesque.

Although limited, wrestling's lack of restriction and lack of boundary between performer and spectator opens the door for negotiations of meaning and reformulations. For instance, consider the holders of wrestling's most coveted title, heavyweight champion of the world. In America, over the past twenty years of television wrestling, the heroic heavyweight championship spot has been filled by white American wrestlers, such as Hulk Hogan, The Ultimate Warrior, Randy "Macho Man" Savage, Ric Flair and Sting. (Although figures such as the heroic Hawaiin wrestler, Ricky "The Dragon" Steamboat briefly held the NWA title in

1989, for the most part, wrestling's top heroic champion has been filled by a white American wrestler). Hogan, Warrior, Savage, Flair and Sting were all capable, entertaining, and deserving heavyweight champions; however, heroic non-white or non-American world champions were rare. Most likely because it reflects the majority of its audience members, having a white American heavyweight champion has been a mainstream wrestling convention. A "gimmick" of sorts that allows for vicarious enjoyment, an easy way to "get over," or impress and attract the predominantly white American audience. However, audiences do not simply support wrestlers because of national or ethnic identity; rather, fans support wrestlers who work hard for them, who perform well for them, and who entertains them. Hence, in 1998, the first non-white World Wrestling Federation (WWF) heavyweight champion of the world, the Rock, was crowned. And before him, during the 1990s, Canadian Bret Hart held the WWF heavyweight championship five times. In 2000, World Championship Wrestling (WCW) has the black American Booker T as heavyweight champion of the world; he too is renowned for his work ethic and years of dedication. Even though he is actually an American, Terry Bunk plays Sabu, an Arabic wrestler. The Arabic figure in American wrestling was often presented as the "heel" or villain and certainly never a "babyface" or hero, exemplified by characters such as Ed Farhat's The Sheik and Jose Azzeri's The Iron Sheik. However, through his high-risk efforts, Sabu became Extreme Championship Wrestling's (ECW) heavyweight champion in the mid-to-late 1990s. As these three wrestlers demonstrate, the voice of the fans brought them wrestling's highest honour, overcoming the television standard of having a heroic white American fit the role of the world's greatest. Proving the audience's belief in wrestling's central myth of hard work and perseverance, fans

voted Bret Hart, the Rock, and Sabu into the office of hero; their actual dedication and hard work as performers earned them wrestling's top spot. They are the peoples' champion. Hence, the lack of boundary between spectator and spectacle allows producers to directly respond to fan desires, even if it means breaking a successful gimmick, such as television's reliance on the white American hero.

Due to the carnivalesque nature of wrestling, performers have traditionally had a difficult time existing outside of their wrestling persona. The carnivalesque concerns a blurring of boundaries, and the main boundary blurred by wrestling is the boundary between the wrestler's private identity and his or her public or performing identity. In essence, wrestlers are hyperreal entertainers. Fiske in *Media Matters* says: "Hyperreality is a postmodern sense of the real that accounts for our loss of certainty in being able to distinguish clearly and hierarchically between the modes of its representation" (62). For instance, to sell the verity of their character, many of the most recognizable stars did not venture out into public unless in character. Being celebrities, this worked to promote their next wrestling card and keep audiences guessing about wrestling's artifice. Nonetheless, wrestlers have attempted to be recognized as performers for years, but promoters and the culture itself has resisted such an attempt until recently. For instance, in *Drawing Heat*, Freedman describes how the promoter Jack Tunney is reluctant to admit the choreography of wrestling (12). This contrasts with how Freedman relates that the 1980s Canadian wrestler Dave "The Wildman" Mckigney feels that fans understand it is a show, proven by Freedman's interviews with Mckigney and several fans throughout the book. For instance, Freedman says, fans "come because they know it's fake and what a shame it is too, to see a mockery of fair play, and at the same time how sweet it is to hurl one's fury ripened by the show at

the forces that corrupt a decent chance in life for decent men" (23). Nevertheless, even nowadays, the acknowledgment of the wrestler as a performing character is not universal; rather, most glimpses at the actual person behind the persona feeds back into their persona and their character's development in wrestling drama. A mainstream breakthrough in redefining the wrestler as a performer, director Paul Jay's documentary *Wrestling With Shadows* presents the private side of Bret "Hitman" Hart and the harshness of his entertainment business. This candid documentary and Bret Hart's candid persona signalled a significant shift in the role of the wrestler as an openly recognized performer. After this watershed, numerous mainstream documentaries and biographies appeared acknowledging and celebrating wrestling as "fake." For instance, Mick Foley's biography *Mankind* topped the New York Times best-seller list in 1999, the Arts and Entertainment network devoted a week of their "Biography" series to professional wrestlers, and the television special *Secrets of Pro Wrestling Revealed* garnered huge ratings. Such documentaries, biographies, and television specials all point to the way the wrestler is being openly recognized as an entertainer. Nonetheless, such glimpses into the person behind the persona often meld into wrestling story. Bret Hart caricatures his persona of a wrestler who is let down by the business, complaining about the way no one in WCW gives him a real chance to become champion. And Mick Foley, after hinting at his retirement in candid interviews, goes on to hold numerous retirement matches, being retired on more than one occasion only to return because of a special stipulation and retire again. He finally retires, but in 2000 he returns again, not as a wrestler, but as the WWF commissioner. The point is that in wrestling, entertainment dictates. If private truths enrich a plot or if

audiences desire a certain character development, then wrestling story strives to deliver.

**Wrestling as Serial Melodrama**

Rounding out its three primary dramatic functions as mythic ritual and carnivalesque theater, wrestling is also a serial melodrama. Complication and conflict are given its greatest freedom through wrestling's melodrama. Television wrestling's serial episodic nature is most directly related to soap operas; however, the episodic form itself can be traced back even further to such passionate adventures evident in Homer's *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Like ancient epics or modern soap operas, the emotions of wrestling are grand, for, as Barthes insists in *Mythologies*, wrestling is a "spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice" (19). Archetypal heroes and villains do battle with one another week after week and gain depth as audiences familiarize themselves with the various feuds and plots the various wrestlers enact over the course of their careers. In this way, the career of a wrestler is like a series of adventures, a journey fraught with different story-lines, different wrestling organizations, and different dramatic roles. In order to specifically understand wrestling's dramatic function as a serial melodrama, the features it shares with television soap operas must be analyzed.

Building off of Abelman, Allen, and Brown, soap operas are characterized by such characteristics as continuity, intimacy, domesticity, topicality, interruption, repetition, and suspense; such elements are essential to television wrestling. As for continuity, Abelman in *Reaching Critical Mass* says "In soap operas, enigmas proliferate and the hermeneutic code predominates, making the expectation of resolved conflicts rather than conflict resolution itself the driving force (354).

Similarly, wrestling programs are a series of endless conflicts, a cyclical process where heroes are corrupted and villains revive themselves as heroes. Since in every new match, a wrestler must prove himself or herself anew, the format of ongoing conflict without clear resolution fits quite nicely. Every wrestler's immediate goal is to win the match and every wrestler's ultimate goal is to become champion; however, over the course of his or her career, a wrestler is motivated by a multitude of intervening goals. Distinguishing between classical Hollywood film narratives and television soap opera narratives, Allen in *Speaking* declares:

> The source of the soap opera's paradigmatic complexity is its large community of interrelated characters. The Hollywood film or traditional novel is structured around a limited number of characters, a few of whom are marked more specifically as protagonists or antagonists. The events of the narrative "happen" to them, and the fates of the minor characters hinge on that of the heroes and heroines. Soap opera narratives, on the other hand, contain upwards of forty regularly-appearing characters, and while some are more prominent than others at any given time, none can be singled out as the motor of the narrative. A great deal might happen to individual characters . . . but very little happens to alter the nature of the community. The soap opera community is a self-perpetuating, self-preserving system little affected by the turbulence experienced by its individual members or the fate of any one character. (69-71)

Paralleling the soap opera world, professional wrestling consists of a large community of interrelated characters. A wrestling program is not the story of one protagonist against one anatgonist; rather, there are a multitude of story lines involving a wide variety of protagonists and antagonists. Moreover, each wrestler

has his or her own motivation, allowing viewers to side with whomever they please and not necessarily the wrestler in the hero role. As in soap operas, much can happen to an individual wrestler, but the individual's fate does not alter the entire wrestling world. So, each wrestler strives to become champion, gain power, or attain prestige and honour. However, because the wrestler has other obstacles to overcome or agendas to fulfill, the ultimate goal of becoming champion may never even be achieved. Nevertheless, the goal of creating effective serial melodrama is being achieved; that is, viewers tune in to experience the ongoing dilemmas faced by their favorite characters. The difference in wrestling is that the character has a life beyond the wrestling organization, the program, or the performer's contract. Not counting spinoffs, a sitcom character's life ends when the program ends; however, in wrestling, a character's adventures at different wrestling programs and in different capacities is quite possible.

Still dealing with continuity, in *Reaching Critical Mass*, Abelman says soap operas achieve continuity through "narrative anomalies, lack of narrative resolution, and lack of narrative closure" (355). In essence, wrestling adapts such techniques to achieve its serial nature as well. Narrative anomalies refer to the "kernal story-lines that carry from one episode to the next, from the premiere of the program to the program's eventual cancellation" (355). Like soap operas that have such a voluminous collection of story-lines, dating back for years, many wrestlers have feuds that last for their entire career; so, it is difficult to easily chart the origins of their conflicts. And like its soap opera counterparts, exposition often takes the form of montage, which explains the dynamics of a feud. In wrestling, an edited series of clips may open a program or be interspersed throughout a program, reviewing the cliffhangers from the last episode and reminding viewers

about the pending dilemmas. Wrestling, however, moves beyond the use of such a montage as exposition and also utilizes the montage as a commercial that may promote an upcoming pay-per-view event. As for the lack of narrative resolution and like Allen and Brown, Abelman points out that soap operas are comprised of "an indefinitely expanding middle." Like soaps, wrestling utilize satellite story-lines, "events that occur in each episode that serve to manipulate the protagonists' behavior for the course of that episode only." Paraphrasing Abelman, this allows for lateral movement in the narrative, when a satellite story-line impacts several characters. Vertical movement occurs when a new conflict or satellite story-line is introduced (356). Brown in *Soap Opera* points out that "Soap operas feature multiple characters as well as multiple points of view, which means that problems can be approached from many angles" (51). Similarly, the multitude of wrestling characters allows for a wide variety of plots based upon the differing perspectives or individual motivations. Overall, such soap opera techniques are well-suited to wrestling, because they allow for a great deal of narrative flexibility, which in turn permit a wide-range of feuds and motivations. Concerning the way viewers watch soap operas, Allen in *Speaking* explains that "because our wandering viewpoint "wanders" not only syntagmatically but paradigmatically as well (from character to character to character) there are no such limits to what can "happen" to a given character and thus none to our expectations" (77). While characters in soap operas may be killed off, wrestling characters may be dropped at any time, because of a contract dispute, retirement, or injury. In addition, if a performer is authentically injured, a replacement feud can be easily added; or, for that matter, if a new performer is signed, he or she can easily become a part of the program. Abelman in *Reaching Critical Mass* say this lack of narrative closure refers to the

fact that "there is no point of final narrative closure toward which the soap opera narrative moves" (357). Since the ritual drama is constantly being reenacted and since the carnivalesque allows for a high-degree of participatory voice, so long as fans desire more action, more story-lines, and new heroes/villains, wrestling has no need to end its conflicts. In fact, since its inception, wrestling has found a place for itself on television.

In other serial forms, one character is associated with one show or its spin-off, but in wrestling, it is not the show, but the wrestler's career that links all wrestling programs together. For instance, Verne Gagne wrestled in the 1950s and then ran his own promotion, the American Wrestling Association (AWA) into the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although he was functioning in different capacities, his name and image connected the Golden Age of Wrestling in the 1950s with the AWA. Or consider The Outsiders, Scott Hall and Kevin Nash. They leave the WWF and enter WCW as "outsiders," referring to their previous association with the WWF. In the WWF, Hall was "Razor" Ramon and Nash was Diesal. Legally, they could no longer use their WWF names, so they opted to use their real names, Hall and Nash. This shedding of their former names did not kill off their former character; wrestling performers are not like actors in that one actor plays different roles and each role is separated by a distinct film of television series. Instead, in wrestling, a change in name is considered a development of character; so, in shedding Ramon and Diesal, Hall and Nash were shedding their formerly more "fictional" selves. Using their actual names, Hall and Nash moved a step closer to fans, becoming less cartoonish and more realistic wrestlers. So, the plot is that they came to take over WCW as their "real" selves, Hall and Nash. They caused havoc and eventually created the New World Order (NWO) with another

former WWF wrestler, Hulk Hogan. They go on to become the Wolf Pac, which dismantles, and later they resume their careers as Hall and Nash. Despite their association with first WWF and then WCW, and despite their NWO and Wolf Pac gangs, their career is connected by the development of their character. So, all of their matches and feuds are linked and understood by the fact that they are the protagonist of their own ongoing soap opera, their career. Fiction and actuality are mixed to such a degree that the terms may no longer have any distinct meaning; hence, wrestlers are hyperreal beings. In a sense then, while the wrestling program is in itself an embodiment of continuity (evident through the narrative anomalies, lack of resolution, and lack of closure), the career of a wrestler is also an ongoing biographical journey of character.

As for intimacy, Abelman says television as a domestic medium "can offer depictions of people in situations that grow and change over time, allowing for greater audience involvement and a sense of becoming a part of the lives and action of the characters" (357). As alluded to in the career of a wrestler, it is the character and the dilemmas that a character faces that causes audiences to tune in every week and even causes audiences to tune into a variety of wrestling organizations. Hence, it is not simply plot or special effects that sell a traveling wrestling show, but the performers themselves. Even though pacing and plot development are crucial to maximizing the appeal of a program, the performer also plays a crucial role in drawing audiences. So, without even any plot, if a well-known television wrestler turned up on a low-budget local wrestling show, people would tune in. Being media celebrities, the audience are caught up in the wrestler's charisma and ability to perform. For instance, ECW star Sabu turns up for a local Calgary Stampede wrestling show in 2000. Even though it would have helped stir

excitement, plot development is not crucial to explaining his arrival. Fans would tune in just to see Sabu, not only because of his celebrity, but also because they will understand this visit as another episode in his overall career and the overall growth of his character. The intimacy fans have for wrestlers is evident in not only arena audience, but the gossip on internet sites, 1-900 information lines, and the circulation of fan magazines. There are a multitude of wrestling sites on the internet and performers (wrestlers, promoters, managers, and so on) often hold discussions with fans. Every mainstream wrestling program has a 1-900 information line that promises to give fans inside information on story lines and business deals. Magazines are a forum within which fans can become acquainted with the personal side of wrestlers, gauge the various rankings of the best performers, order merchandise, sift through photographs, and even send in their own letters to the editor. Thus, the soap opera intimacy of wrestling is evident in the fan privileging of the character (especially over organization or plot) and the various levels of audience participation, from being a vocal fan in the auditorium to simply sharing wrestling story-lines and fan gossip.

Domesticity is another marker of soap opera form reflected in wrestling. Even though wrestling concerns many public issues, it also deals intensively with domestic issues. Brown in *Soap Opera* says "Relationships between people are the essence of soap opera plots" (55). The same could be said of wrestling plots. On the one hand, honour, betrayal, and loyalty are presented in the public domain, through story-lines involving politics, business, and economics. On the other hand, honour, betrayal, and loyalty are often presented in the personal domain, through story-lines involving family, friends, and health. Such private relationships and issues are on excessive melodramatic display. According to Abelman in *Reaching*

*Critical Mass*, in soap operas, "The family serves as the ideal backdrop for emotional entanglements and a vast assortment of interpersonal conflicts" (359). In wrestling, the family is either an actual personal family (friends, spouses, or lovers), a family of friends (gang, group, or affiliation), or even a family of health/personal trainers (coaches, doctors, and mentors). Thus, the majority of wrestling's melodrama involves such familial inter-relations, feuds, and misunderstandings. Evoking elements from the American Civil War and possibly harkening back to biblical conflicts between siblings, family members are often torn apart in wrestling, exemplified by the frequent use of the betrayal plot. For instance, in the early 1980s, Hulk Hogan and Paul Orndorff were loyal friends and wrestling partners. However, Paul Orndorff's jealousy caused him to turn his back on Hogan and begin a melodramatic feud. And, referring to the Revolutionary War, Hogan routinely called Orndorff a Benedict Arnold, guilty of turning on not only Hogan, but also on the American people, and the fans around the world. This Benedict Arnold figure, or the traitor to a family unit, is a constant in wrestling. For example, in the early 1990s brothers Bret Hart and Owen Hart engaged in an ongoing feud of jealously and sibling rivalry. Their families were interviewed, distraught at the way they were being torn apart by Bret and Owen's rivalry. In the fall of 2000, WCW presented another Benedict Arnold figure when the long-time American hero "Hacksaw" Jim Duggan turned over to the Canadian patriots lead by Lance Storm. For over fifteen years, Duggan represented the American patriot, exemplified by his signature move, a knee drop known as "Old Glory." Duggan shaved off his characteristic beard and donned the red and white colours of Canada and joined Lance Storm's team, exemplifying the traitorous American. The difference with Duggan is that he is siding with Canada, a long-time ally of the

United States. So, even though Duggan is a traitor, he is somewhat of a playful or silly version of the traitor figure. As is evident then, domestic-type disputes are the source for much of wrestling's melodrama.

Like soap operas, wrestling shows need to be topical, or have contemporary relevance. Broadcast live (like the original soaps) and constantly travelling, wrestling needs to be not only contemporary, but also relevant locally or regionally. Brown in *Soap Opera* associates traditional oral storytelling's necessity to be culturally in sync with the audience with television soap opera's necessity to be culturally relevant to its viewers: "In live performance the performer adapts the song or tale depending on the audience's receptiveness and responses. Soap operas have been and continue to be comparatively responsive to the interests of viewers" (62). Similarly, professional wrestling must be harmonized with its audience to, not only maintain high ratings, but also immediately engage the arena audience. The contemporary nature of wrestling can be illustrated by the WWF's utilization of the Gulf War. During the Gulf War, Hogan fights the traitorous American soldier Sergeant Slaughter, symbolizing America's dominance over Iraq. Or, reflecting the growing economic prowess of Japan during the early 1990s, Yokozuna played the terrorizing Japanese threat. A massive sumo-wrestler type, Yokozuna demonstrated his power over a multitude of American wrestlers, symbolically reflecting Japanese economic prowess and thus generating a great deal of "heat" from the fans. Yokozuna became a viable threat due not only to his size, but also due to his embodiment of the Japanese economic threat. Wrestling's local or regional relevance is integral as well, for wrestlers must involve and please the arena fans. This is especially important when there is a live broadcast. Minor methods include having villains speak ill of the town they are in, while the heroes

speak highly of the town, often citing famous sports figures, teams, or legendary wrestlers from the area. Major methods involve developing an entire plot that leads into the local/regional event. For instance, in 1999, WCW held a heavyweight championship title tournament that would narrow down to two wrestlers fighting in Toronto's Skydome at a pay-per-view event. The two final wrestlers ended up being Canadians Chris Benoit and Bret Hart, with Hart winning the title. Being the home country of the wrestlers helped excite the arena audience, allowing for a highly-charged broadcast. Because millions of viewers around the world also have to be pleased, the local/regional favour must not diminish wrestling's mass appeal. In the case of Benoit and Hart this was not a problem, because they are well-respected by fans as highly capable performers, fully able to deliver a physical story. So, along with timeliness, wrestling broadcasts must excite local/regional arena audiences without losing television/pay-per-view audiences.

Soap operas and wrestling programs also share the characteristics of interruption, repetition, and suspense. Wrestling, like most television, is highly fragmented and interrupted; a program is paced so as to provide suspense at the beginning of a commercial break. In *Visible Fictions*, Ellis says:

> Any fiction series or serial is prone to segmentaliszation, and the series and serial form the vast bulk of broadcast TV material almost everywhere. This segmentalisation takes the form of a rapid alternation between scenes and a frequent return to habitual locations and situations rather than any sustained progression through sequential logical of events. In the series and the serial alike, these segments tend never to coalesce into an overall totalising account. The form that tends to be adopted by TV fiction, in this sense, is the same as

> TV news, with a continuous updating on the latest concatenation of events rather than a final ending or explanation. (120)

Wrestling programs are characterized by segmentalisation; however, at times, there are attempts at forming a somewhat logical connection between the events. Nonetheless, paralleling wrestling, Abelman in *Reaching Critical Mass* says, "revelations, confrontations, and reunions are constantly being interrupted and postponed by switches from one plot to another, jumps from one scene to another, and commercial breaks" (365). In wrestling, repetitions function to reiterate a crucial development in plot or simply to highlight a shocking maneuver. For instance, in the opening segment, a wrestler can hit another in the knee with a mallet. This spectacle of violence can be revisited for three reasons. One, the violent act can appear highly realistic and helps advertise wrestling's verisimilitude, making audiences wonder how such a stunt is achieved. Like a magician with a trick, audiences delight in seeing the trick performed again and again, hoping to uncover the secret. Two, it satisfies the audiences' taste and distaste for spectacular violence. That is, the audiences are there to see violent combat; so, they have a taste for competitive stunts. However, since such an extreme display evokes a sense of shock, the audience cringes in distaste. This distaste is necessary because it gives wrestling its edge, reminding audience that although they are just "playing" a drama, their drama is a dangerous "play," incurring pain on the players and sometimes only a fraction away from disaster. Three, the opening mallet sequence can be pivotal to the plot of a feud and must be repeated so the television audience is informed of the feud. This allows the audience to anticipate a later pay-per-view event or simply to stay-tuned for the program's climax. If the

wrestler with the mallet and his or her victim open the show, then they may be in that program's final match. Reminding the channel surfers, the show benefits by selling the feud repeatedly throughout a program. It also helps to build suspense towards the climactic final bout. The simplest technique involve repeatedly showing the same footage throughout the broadcast. However, the repeated footage could lose its spectacular impact if simply repeated; hence, the footage is usually repeated in a narratively relevant way. For instance, the mallet footage may be shown and then the hurt heroic wrestler may be seen pacing the floor. By such a side-by-side association, the mallet footage may signify a glimpse into the wrestler's mind. The second time the mallet footage is shown, a sequence involving the villainous wrestler may appear. The villainous wrestler may place the mallet down to celebrate with his gang or his bevy of women. The third time the footage is shown, a sequence involving the heroic wrestler may follow. For instance, the heroic victim steals the mallet while the villain is celebrating. This can be followed by the final commercial break before the final bout. Overall then, continuity, intimacy, domesticity, timeliness, and fragmentation, interruption, repetition, and suspense characterize both soap operas and television wrestling programs.

**Over-the-top**

Essentially, professional wrestling's excessive melodramatic performance style often leads to both tragic excess and comic camp. Since the emotions involved in wrestling's interpersonal traumas are excessive, all of the major passions are on display. However, anger and suffering are the most prominent, since they fuel the melodramatic plots and make the shining moments of triumph

meaningful. So, when wrestlers express, verbally or visually, they usually do so in anger. Verbally, wrestlers swear revenge, shout hatred, and growl in disgust. Visually, wrestlers grimace, sneer, and gnaw their teeth, using their eyes to communicate ferocity. And despite their tough occupation, wrestlers are apt to shed a tear or two if the plot calls for it. Wrestlers scream, wince, and crumble in pain, physical or emotional; they cheer "Whooo!" They burn and they agonize to communicate tragic melodramatic excess. Since betrayal is common, wrestlers are continually shocked/surprised. Extending the role of shock in wrestling's athletic entertainment, the shock of a story is expressed openly and emotionally. On the one hand, this shock can be tragic, leading to feelings of pain, humiliation, and eventually anger. Since tragic shock is serious, empathy is aroused in spectators; this allows viewers to rally behind one wrestler and against another. On the other hand, this shock can be humourous, a type of camp relief celebrating the hyperbolic emotions that are felt when one does lose control through shock/surprise. Shock/surprise does lead to a momentary loss of self-control and without empathy, being startled invokes laughter. Since one loses his or her social mask and reveals the biology of panic, there is embarrassment. When viewed from afar, without empathy, this embarrassment is humourous; spectators look down at the startled performer from their superior vantage point and laugh. Combining the gestures of silent film with the emotional intensity of trash talk shows often leads to comic camp. Melodramatic excess becomes silly. Since poorly motivated emotional excess is prone to invoke laughter, a wrestling program often intersperses comic wrestlers or comic situations as an official relief from the more serious excess. Thus, wrestling's serial melodrama deals with shock/surprise in

two over-the-top ways: one, with empathy, as tragic excess; two, without empathy, as comic camp.

## NARRATIVE ENTERTAINMENT

### The Voice That Sells

To recap, wrestling's dramatic entertainment consists of ritual mythic drama, carnivalesque theater, and serial melodrama. As mass entertainment, though, wrestling is more than just a combination of athletics and dramatics; television wrestling is also a form of narrative entertainment. Wrestling's narrative voice organizes its athletic and dramatic entertainment in a covert and overt way, selling the athletics, selling the drama, and selling future programs. As Red Skelton was apt to say on numerous stage and television appearances, "In the old days, we'd put on a nice little act and then a man would come out to sell a magic tonic that would rid you of all of your ills. In those days, we called it a medicine show. Now we call it television." In wrestling, the promotional capabilities of television are most evident through its narrative voice. Through covert and overt means, wrestling narrative sells the action, emotion, and excitement of the show.

### Visual Narrative Structure

A program's visual narrative structure refers to the way filming/staging techniques tell wrestling's physical and dramatic stories. Without diving into too much stylistic detail, the opening, middle, and ending of a wrestling program will be surveyed. Typically, a show begins with a literal bang; fireworks explode in the opening, signifying its nature as spectacle. The fireworks display is often followed

by a pan of the frantic audience, establishing the chaotic spirit of ilinx. Since wrestling limits audience participation to only voice (cheers/boos) and brief visual shots (placards, hand signals), the carnivalesque environment is restricted, and this is evident by the boundary between the space of the ring and the barricade around the performance space. The opening frames often reveal this limitation, scanning not only the fans, but also the backs of numerous security guards who hold the excited audience away from the performance space. As with agon, the ring is presented as a sacred space, separated from the masses. The teeming audience also adds to the atmosphere of overwhelming emotion, to the feeling of alea, where anything can happen to anyone at any moment. Finally, the opening shots of a teeming audience is a television advertising gimmick, causing home viewers to wonder why everyone is so excited and thus compelling home viewers to stay tuned and find out what all the commotion is about. Hooking home viewers, television audiences wait for the entrance of a heroic/villainous wrestler and the corresponding array of deafening cheers/boos. In essence, these few opening minutes establish the arena location, the ring space, and the atmosphere of excitement. Defining itself as entertainment, either before such an opening display or immediately after, the titles of the wrestling program are displayed. No credits, no authors, and no directors are named; rather, only the title of the program appears accompanied by theme music and a montage of intense wrestling action. Immediately after the title, the camera cuts to the ringside announcers; part of the visual narrative structure, these narrators guide the rest of the show.

Throughout the program, the cameras follow the action in and out of the ring, like a sporting event. Reporters speak with athletes outside of the ring space, while the athletic action is filmed in the ring. Also, like a sports broadcast, the

cameras are visible; audiences can see that this is being filmed live, reminding viewers that anything can happen. Related to this, direct address is prominent, with wrestlers speaking directly into and thus acknowledging the camera. Like a mock documentary, behind-the-scenes footage is often interspersed with the colourful action. Grainy black-and-white security cameras or the roaming reporter, intent on scooping a story or spying on the wrestlers, is accompanied by a hand-held camera. Throughout the middle, the climactic final bout is advertised through glimpses of the two adversaries preparing for their match or through plot complications. As for specific directorial techniques, methods paralleling film are used to deliver the desired feel of the wrestler or the action. For instance, most commonly, a tracking low-angle camera is placed before the wrestler, leading the wrestler to the ring and making the wrestler appear larger and more menacing. If a match is particularly fast-paced, the director switches cameras appropriately, trying not to destroy the fluidity of the action. If a wrestler is particularly ominous, low-key lighting is used to maximize the effect. Thus, directorial techniques, such as choice of angle, editing, and lighting are used in a fashion paralleling film, so as to best invoke the desired feel of the subject matter.

The ending of a wrestling program has two key goals: one, closure, to bring that program to a fitting end; two, continuity, to lead towards the next program. So, punctuating its climactic importance, the final match is often presented without commercial breaks; the intent is to illustrate that even the program-makers will not insert a commercial, because that would take away from the action. In other words, the final action is so important that the producers will not even break it up for a lucrative commercial spot. The evening of fireworks often leaves a faint mist over the ring, providing a parodic sense of the mythic.

And as the final match takes place, the cameras focus primarily on the in-ring action, ending with the dual-functioning final shot. For instance, two wrestlers battle one another and one may even win. But, at that point, other wrestlers may disturb the victor's triumph and wreak vengeance on their defeated ally. The camera captures this chaos, with help from the narrating announcers, and then cuts off abruptly. This leaves viewers with a complication that will feed into the next program. Essentially then, wrestling's visual narrative techniques are used in the following ways: in the beginning, an atmosphere of live excitement is established; throughout the middle, techniques (paralleling their function in film) appropriate to the desired effect are used to advance plot, develop character, and build suspense towards the final match and future feuds; at the end, the action is uninterrupted and the final shot completes the program while setting up a future conflict.

**Verbal Narrative Structure**

More directly and uniquely important to television's wrestling's storytelling is its overt narrative, best represented through the wrestling announcers. However, before the specifics of overt narrative are explored, the dual oral nature of television needs to be briefly addressed. Basically, television is an oral medium in two ways, technologically and culturally. First, in *Visible Fictions*, Ellis points out the primacy of television audio:

> The role played by sound stems from the fact that it radiates in all directions, whereas view of the TV image is sometimes restricted. Direct eye contact is needed with the TV screen. Sound can be heard where the screen cannot be seen. So sound is used to ensure a certain level of attention, to drag viewers back to looking at the set. Hence the importance of

> programme announcements and signature tunes and, to some extent, of music in various kinds of series. Sounds hold attention more consistently than image, and provides a continuity that holds across momentary lapses of attention. (128)

In essence then, sound has a primary function in television, drawing viewers to pay attention to the small screen (especially small when contrasted with cinema). In other words, television does not command our visual attention as the larger-than-life cinematic screen. Hence, sound must be used to compensate for television's comparable lack of visual command. To illustrate, consider the way television commercials rely upon infectious jingles, and less creatively, simply having someone shout into the camera, promising the best deals in town. Because of television's technological strengths, sound, music, and narration are ideal to wrestling.

This technological fact leads into television's second function, as a mass culture's oral storytelling medium. Oratorical rhetoric has a solid place on television. To name just a few such orators, news reporters, talk show hosts, and televanglists epitomize television's fundamental reliance upon verbal communication. Unlike radio, television visuals support the orator, allowing for a full communication of the speaker's gesture, stance, and facial expression. Hence, direct address is common in television, evident in political addresses, telethon pleas for charitable donations, and even the "story-time" of children's programming. Such a performer may open a book and read to a group of children, into the camera to home viewers, or to both. A camera may focus on the pages and text of a book, while a reading voice tells the story. In any case, a speaker functions as an overt narrator, telling a story to an audience. Television's abundant use of the

narrator is evident even in portions of news broadcasts, where the reporter simply reads a teleprompter, serving as the medium through which text is communicated. Even the monologues of late-night talk show hosts are read from cue cards. In a way, then, television viewers are often watching entertainers read to them. Hence, the oral storyteller of old is still alive, albeit in a modified form and in a more limited capacity. Nonetheless, this televisual capacity for oral storytelling foregrounds television wrestling narrative affinity with oral folk tales.

Folk tales and legends were, no doubt, told for a myriad of reasons, but a few basic cultural functions can be outlined. According to Jack Zipes in *Spells of Enchantment*, "Oral tales served to stabilize, conserve, or challenge the common beliefs, laws, values, and norms of a group" (xv). Likewise, culturally, professional wrestling functions to stabilize, conserve, or challenge common ideological beliefs. In terms of stabilizing beliefs, during the Gulf War, America's stance was made explicit in the ring. Hence, Hulk Hogan has feuds with and defeats the Middle Eastern threat Col. Mustafa, General Adnan, and the brainwashed Sergeant Slaughter. This spectacle not only helps motivate the masses to support the American war effort, but also narratively silences any potential opposition. That is, any mass discomfort in going to war is stabilized by this narrative of the wholesome Hulk trying to do what is right by combatting the destructive Middle Eastern forces and the American traitor. As I noted earlier, this narrative is a variation on the betrayal script in wrestling, where a wrestler betrays his friend by selling out to material or social gain. Here, Sergeant Slaughter comes under the influence of these Middle Eastern enemies, and unwillingly "sells-out," through being brainwashed. Like ancient oral tales then, the time, the speaker, and the audience influence the way the basic script is modified and communicated.

Hence, professional wrestling's reliance on standard scripts are modified according to current tastes, paralleling the role of oral folk tales in traditional cultures. However, wrestling is oral storytelling on a mass scale. For instance, in terms of conserving values, the hard working underdog victim routinely defeats his more economically or physical powerful opponent. For instance, in 2000, but throughout his career, the ridiculed Spike Dudley of ECW has made a name for himself as "The Giant Killer." Like his folk tale counterpart, Spike is a tiny man, who routinely battles opponents who eclipse him in both size and weight. Unlike his folk tale counterpart however, Spike does not always win, nor is he involved in only a limited number of plots. So, even though Spike Dudley often performs the folk tale of the little guy winning against all odds, wrestling does not mechanically present folk tales. Spike has to lose to provide dramatic variety and make those matches where he does win more meaningful; moreover, losing makes Spike more "realistic" and less of a folk tale caricature. Thus, wrestling utilizes elements of folk tale plots and characters, but makes room for variety and change, as evident in its ability to challenge norms. In terms of questioning social standards, wrestling, like oral folk tales, are malleable enough to change with the values of an era. For instance, since Gorgeous George, the effeminate wrestler has been a despised villain. George Wagner was a trained psychiatrist who capitalized the Postwar atmosphere in America and its ideal social prescription for men to become the practical, level-headed, and manly heads of nuclear families. Hence, he presented the opposite -- an arrogant and fashion-conscious American with curled locks of gold. He became, as Morton and O'Brien put it in *Wrestling to Rasslin'*, "a star people loved to hate when he assumed the prissy, marcelled villainous ring persona of Gorgeous George" (47). However, in the late 1998, the effeminate wrestler

was rewritten in WCW when Saturn was forced to wear a dress for three months because he lost a key match. Instead of being ridiculed, he was cheered for his ability to endure the embarrassment and his ability to still wrestle with focus. Thus, by being the victimized underdog hero, Saturn challenged certain cross-dressing and homosexual overtones that were standard in wrestling, ultimately offering an updated variation for more tolerant audiences. So, like interactive oral tales in traditional folk societies, wrestling is a narrative arena within which we negotiate or reiterate political and social values by stabilizing, conserving, or challenging popular beliefs.

Essentially, this stabilizing, conserving, and challenging is mediated by the wrestling announcer. Professional wrestling is performed as a live athletic event, but has a planned structure, plot, and cast of characters. Negotiating between these dual functions is the narrative voice; specifically, the play-by-play commentator. In a world of chaos and violence, the announcer is the lone voice of clarity and reason, effectively delivering wrestling's poetics.

**Flipping Aristotle Upside Down**

According to the role of the announcer and the dynamics of television production, the easiest way to understand the poetics of professional wrestling requires turning Aristotle's *Poetics* upside down. So, character and plot are not as important to the ringside commentator or television dynamics as spectacle and melody is. This is not to say character and plot are not important, for they are crucial to wrestling's athletic and dramatic entertainment. However, the narrative voice in wrestling begins with spectacle. The athletics are easy to understand visually and plots are dramatized. Wrestlers express and develop their character

through the way they wrestle, how they dress, and what they say. So, narrating plot and character are not primary. Instead, the announcer simply chronicles and recapitulates the action and gossip when necessary, but does not control the wrestlers like the narrator of a book. Rather, maximizing television capability for sound and immediacy, spectacle is crucial to wrestling's overt narrative voice. To understand the announcer's organizing role as narrator more closely then, Aristotle's ranking will be reversed, building from spectacle, melody, language, and thought, and language, and then moving into character and plot.

Spectacle deserves primary ranking for announcers, because it best represents the way announcers communicate the excitement of wrestling and the pleasure of fans. The pleasure of the audience stems from a very important process of recognizing the athletic action through psychological vertigo, through the shock of viewing daring stunts. Being an ideal mass medium for on-the-spot coverage, television is particularly good at capturing the moment. Concerning television's ability to capture the moment, consider Boddy in *Fifties Television*:

> According to many early writers on television, the essential technological feature of television versus the motion picture was the electronic medium's capacity to convey a simultaneous distant performance visually. In this regard, the medium was a unique synthesis of the immediacy of the live theatrical performance, the space-conquering powers of radio, and the visual strategies of the motion picture. (80)

All viewers have to do is turn on the television and witness a live event right in their homes. It is the perfect medium then, for live nonfictional spectacles, like wars, high-profile court cases, and even football. Being both a medium capable of

capturing the moment and being a convenient, domestically-situated medium, television is an ideal mass medium for the live athletic drama of professional wrestling, relaying its vivid sense of the unexpected and the explosive. Stylistically, overt narrative sound exploits this sense of immediacy and unexpectedness. Wincing spectators shudder and shake their heads at the crazed action not only because of the daring feats, but also because the commentators sell the action. Hence, announcers shout, grunt, and exclaim in accordance with the most amazing violent feats, enhancing the physical artifice, making it appear more realistic and urging television viewers to react similarly. As established, the shock of ilinx is the central goal of wrestling; invoking primal feelings associated with survival, viewers recognize the physical shock through a momentary feeling of panic, distress, or surprise. Without delivering such excitement, wrestling loses its appeal; so, announcers must accent the action and deliver this sense of astonishment and excitement. Consequently, announcers are frequently expressing shock, often interrupting their normal banter with loud exclamations, and thus urging viewers to look at the television screen. Moreover, watching wrestling, or any sporting event for that matter, without the sound turned on reveals the weakness of the television image alone; in wrestling especially, the violent excess loses its dynamic charge and thus, a great deal of its verisimilitude and its viewing pleasure. Wrestling announcers however, are not alone in accenting the action of wrestling, the spectacle that allows fans to experience various moments of shock, especially panic, surprise, and concern Aiding announcers are the grunts and groans of the wrestlers, their screams of agony, or shouts of triumph. In addition, the sound of the ring accents the action; microphones underneath the ring highlight the chaotic noise of body slams and splashes. Thus, just as Aristotle insists that

pity and fear must be aroused in viewers of Greek tragedy, so narrative sound must accent the action in order to arouse moments of the fear-state (of surprise, panic, and concern) in viewers. Insuring all of the ring risks and dramatic efforts pay off in the television viewer, accenting the action through sound sells television wrestling's spectacle.

Next on the list of importance for the overt narrative voice is melody and language. Melody refers to the rhythm of the ring and the role of music. Since the physical story is paced in a particular way, the descriptive commentary must parallel that of the ring's. Fast-paced action must be described succinctly or simply be accented by the sound of the ring and the wrestlers themselves. Distracting viewers, too much unnecessary commentary over intense action or dramatic situations destroy the allure of the athletic and dramatic entertainment. Music also plays a significant narrative role. Signalling the arena entrance of a wrestler, a character's ring music is easily identifiable to fans. Often, only the first few chords or music are necessary to bring the arena fans to their feet and cause home viewers to focus on the television set. A wrestler's theme music is a narrative introduction, a televisual means with which the notion of "In enters . . ." is communicated. Language in wrestling, refers to the function of the various types of overt voices heard within a program, including the straight announcer, the trickster sidekick, the guest announcer, the reporter, the voice-over advertiser, and the ring announcer. At the center of wrestling's overt narrative voice is the straight announcer, who is essentially a play-by-play commentator. The straight announcer uses authentic sports terminology, emphasizing the proper names for wrestling moves, referring to the history of the sport, and basically expressing the ideal moral order of the athletic and dramatic entertainment. Although presented as

impartial, the straight announcer leans towards the heroes and fan-favorites, presenting their cause and supporting their perspectives. To provide debate, the straight announcer is paired with the trickster sidekick, who usually disagrees with everything the straight announcer believes. The trickster announcer mocks the in-ring action, criticizes wrestling, and promotes cheating, deception, and other immoral actions. By contrasting the straight announcer, the trickster sidekick provides opportunities for interesting debate and entertaining squabbling that fills for any moments of slow physical or dramatic action. Such debate may even help articulate the physical and dramatic conflicts, serving as narrative exposition and description from two opposite narrative perspectives. Frequently, a guest announcer joins in as a narrative voice, and may be a celebrity, a wrestling character, or another such guest. The guest announcer usually has a vested interest in a current or future match and is there to make his or her view clear or simply to generate interest in a future match. The reporter interviews the wrestling characters, most typically serving as an impetus for a promotional advertisement. Wrestling reporters parallel the duties of news reporters, presenting exclusive special reports, in-depth interviews, and often, the 1-900 gossip lines. The voice-over advertiser sells future cards, merchandising, toys, and so on, in a wrestling program's array of commercials. Finally, the ring announcer simply introduces matches and declares the winners. Without getting into extensive detail, specific language styles follow the specific function of an announcer; more importantly, wrestling commentators often articulate the agon, alea, ilinx, and mimicry of the sport through its terms and sayings.

Mimetic agon, alea, and ilinx are frequently referred to in wrestling language; announcers use terms to evoke the atmosphere associated with Caillois'

categories. For instance, to evoke agon, a straight announcer may refer to it as a "sacred space", a "sanctuary of fair-play", or, as the "squared-circle", referring to the ring's specific status as a space for mimetic agon. Ball in *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama* explains that amateur styles of wrestling are performed in a circle, but "professional wrestling takes place in a square called a "ring." Although the term "ring" denotes a circle, modern professional wrestling uses the rectangular shape over other possibilities." The "circle implies no defensible home territory," and represents agon's "equality among participants" (71). Hence, when wrestling commentators refer to the ring as the squared-circle, the circle denotes agon. To denote the organized spectacle of the conflict, the commentators use the word "squared." According to Ball, "The most striking difference between the circle and the square is that the square produces corners" (72). Except for tag teams or single wrestlers with managers/escorts, the home corner is not as obvious in wrestling as it is in boxing, but it does exist for even the lone wrestler. At the end of a match, a victorious wrestler may exit the way he or she entered or climb the ropes of one corner and cheer, indicating a home corner. More importantly, the four corners of the ring represent the four corners of the world, which is often referred to when commentators express a champion's ability to "Take on all comers." Consequently, when victorious, a wrestler often traverses the entire square, strutting to each corner, celebrating his or her dominance. The champion has defeated wrestlers from all four corners of the wrestling world and hence can circle the ring apron, roaming around and around like an animal defining its territory. In wrestling parlance then, the commentator refers to the ring as a "squared-circle," in order to signify wrestling's mimetic agon.

Alea and ilinx are often evoked as well through wrestling language. For instance, with alea, both straight and trickster commentators repeatedly use phrases such as "Anything can happen!" or "I don't know what's going on?" To illustrate the undiscriminating nature of chance, announcers often simply exclaim, "Totally unexpected!" or "Even I'm surprised, folks!" Ilinx is by far the most often evoked element of games. Announcers are notorious for such exclamations as "Shocking!", "Amazing!", "Oh my God!", "I can't believe it!, and "Holy . . ." followed by a dramatic pause or commercial break. Moreover, such a tone of being shocked and amazed is prevalent in the rhythm of the announcer's speech. The straight announcer generally describes, but does so by flowing with the tide of action, encompassing the energy of the athletics into his or her reading of the match, punctuating the most shocking moments with the aforementioned phrases of ilinx. Overall then, there are various types of announcers that speak the language of wrestling and, primarily, wrestling narration is filled with terms that articulate the atmosphere of agon, alea, ilinx, and mimesis.

In wrestling, thought refers to any overt narrative that produces an effect on its own, as narrative, not as drama. Hence, thought refers to the effect of what is said by a speaker alone. Under this section, the welcoming, commercial break, and farewell by the play-by-play commentators are included. There is also the in-ring announcer's introduction of the wrestlers before a match and the declaration of a winner after a match. Even the speeches of wrestlers can be included here, because they strive to arouse emotions, engage audiences, and generate heat through oration. Almost a parody of political debates, wrestlers argue their positions, trying to justify their actions in the past and hoping to frighten by describing what they will do in the future. Monologues are a chance to connect

with the audience, through voicing a catch-phrase or rallying audiences to a wrestler's cause. Ultimately thought is significant, because of wrestling's promotional format for future events and pay-per-views. Utilizing the advertising basis of television, as Morton and O'Brien put it in *Wrestling to Rasslin'*, "The television card is one long promotion of the matches the cardmaker has booked in the near future at an arena in the viewing area" (49). Hence, throughout a wrestling program, announcers pitch an upcoming event, verbally reminding viewers that a major wrestling card is just around the corner. Basically then, melody refers to the announcer's role of paralleling the pace of the ring storytelling and the ability of theme songs to help introduce specific wrestlers. Thought refers to the use of speech aside from dramatic action, especially significant in organizing wrestling's format (such as opening/closing addresses for the program and matches) and in terms of persuasion (convincing audiences of the action's verisimilitude and excitement, rallying audiences to a wrestler's narrative cause or advertising future events).

Character in wrestling refers to the various players, the types of wrestlers, announcers, managers, escorts, and so on. Wrestling characters are developed primarily through their physical and dramatic functions. And the commentators simply express such personalities as mediated by the fans. That is, commentators mediate between the goal of a wrestler's personality and the desire of the fans. For instance, if fans do not like the heroic persona of a wrestler, that wrestler most likely changes into a villain. Through exposition, interviews, and description, the overt narrative helps to make such transitions smooth. Overt narrative explains any change in character, for instance, highlighting the way a wrestler is using a shortcut to win. In an interview, the reporter asks a touchy question and is

roughed up by the wrestler. Then, when the wrestler switches into a more villainous role, the straight commentator may recall events leading up to such a change, even insisting that the wrestler always seemed to be a villain at heart. In contrast, the trickster sidekick may argue that such a change is admirable, because the wrestling business is unfair and cheating is the only smart way to win. Thus, while the character of wrestling players are developed through the way they deal with athletic and dramatic conflicts, the overt narrative voice helps articulate such a development by mediating between fan reactions and wrestling personae.

Finally, for narrative voice and television dynamics, plot is last in importance. From the standpoint of the overt narrative voice, plot and character are last because they are left to the dynamics of the physical and dramatic entertainment. The announcer's role with plot is basically to identify various dilemmas, reiterate significant events, and promote future climactic bouts within the program or on later programs. Most explicitly though, announcers articulate and reiterate the fundamental morals or assumptions in wrestling plots through cliches or modified cliches. For instance, straight announcers often express the themes of wrestling in the following sayings: "power corrupts," "you cannot trust anyone," "survival of the fittest," "respect through suffering," and "life is pain." Such narrative cliches help organize the physical and dramatic plots, while reiterating beliefs central to the working-class myth of wrestling. On television, these cliches or modified cliches become appropriate sound-bites, quickly summing up past-events and evoking future developments, while simultaneously celebrating wrestling's athletic and dramatic plots. Overall then, in terms of importance, television wrestling narrative flips Aristotle's poetics upside-down, with overt

narrators communicating spectacle, melody, thought, and language first, and then character and plot.

**The Announcer's Threefold Task**

Ultimately, then, the overt narrator's sales pitch is threefold: to accent the action, to recognize the moment, and to be a part of an entertainment team. As described, accenting the action through exclamations delivers wrestling's thrilling moments of shock/surprise. Underscoring the performance not only makes the performance seem more realistic, but it also draws the home viewer's gaze towards the screen. Often such moments of shock are replayed throughout a program, with announcers repeating their exclamations of amazement and thus they help promote the excitement of the show within the program itself, causing channel surfers to slow down and investigate the commotion. Recognizing the moment refers to the announcer's ability to fully exploit the medium's penchant for immediacy. Since wrestling is prepared entertainment, the announcer must help erase any sense of arrangement and emphasize the unexpectedness of plot twists or character changes. Hence, announcers are often surprised, dazed by sudden deviations in plot or character. Moreover, since wrestling is broadcast live, announcers must actually be prepared for anything, such as changes in format, actual injuries, real deviations from the script, technical problems, unexpected fan reactions, and so on. Announcers hold a show together, trying to present the sense of shock and surprise, while smoothing over any actual shocking or surprising deviations. Finally, even though announcers are crucial to selling the athletics and dramatics of wrestling, their narrative must not detract from the action in the ring, physical or theatrical. They must know when to pepper exposition, promotion, or debate with

exclamations of shock, bringing viewers back to the thrill of the action. Hence, announcers must sell the thrill of the action, being careful not to dissipate it by narrating when they should be reacting or simply viewing along with the spectators. Along with being aware of the athletic and dramatic action, announcers must be aware of the other sound elements, careful not to dissipate their effect. For instance, it would be futile to narrate during the fireworks, so announcers pause and simply react for a moment. Since theme music often introduces a wrestler, the announcer again simply reacts, awaiting, along with the audience, the arrival of the character. Announcers on a live wrestling broadcast must also be ready for the unpredictable reactions of the fans; in other words, their narration and commentating must work with the chants, jeers, and cheers of the fans. Arena fans may begin chanting or singing along with a theme song, as is often the case when The Sandman, from ECW, enters the ring. It would ruin the moment if announcers spoke over this spectacle; instead then, the announcers become quiet and let the sound of the fans take over wrestling's overt narrative for a while. Thus, the narrator sells the physical and theatrical entertainment by accenting the action, recognizing the moment, and being a part of a team.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, professional wrestling entertains the masses through athletic, dramatic, and narrative entertainment. Sport stems from the biological instinct to survive and professional wrestling stems from sport. Being a socially-sanctioned form of violence, sport organizes the fight-to-the-death, with one-on-one competition being the most engaging for audiences, evoking feelings associated

with survival. In essence, Caillois' concepts of games empower the entertainment dynamic of professional wrestling. The physical storytelling maximizes the agon, alea, ilinx, and mimesis of games. With athletics, the emphasis is on the moment to moment conflict, the clarity of visual conflict. The primary goal is delivering daring physical action that evokes a moment of astonishment in spectators. The dramatic entertainment consists of ritual, carnival and serial melodrama. Utilizing the means, not the end of sport, the central of mythic ritual is evident through the replaying of wrestling's central working-class myth. The participatory nature of mythic ritual leads into wrestling's carnivalesque. The carnivalesque allows for a limited degree of audience participation and causes the performers to be closely intertwined with their theatrical persona. Unlike the singular match, the serial melodrama emphasizes the conflict over a longer stretch of time; for wrestlers, over their career, with their persona being the link between their tenure at different programs or in different roles. All of this athletic and dramatic entertainment is organized by narrative. The oral storytelling function of wrestling highlights its cultural importance, reflecting and negotiating the beliefs viewers value, the problems viewers face, and the way viewers deal with their problems in accordance with the changing social and cultural values of a generation. Specifically, the narrative entertainment is both indirect and direct. The indirect is the camera angle, lighting, and other such filming techniques, with a primary emphasis on the methods used when filming documentary and sport spectacle. The direct is the voice of the narrator or other aspects of sound, such as music and fan reaction. Immediacy and audio, along with the narrator's threefold sales task to accents the action, recognize the moment, and be a part of an entertainment team privileges spectacle over all other Aristotelian elements. Essentially then, by evoking

moments of visceral astonishment, professional wrestling is a narrative athletic drama, truly using conflicting bodies of muscled mass to entertain the masses.

# CHAPTER III: My Hero: Examining the Rebel Hero Figure from the International, American, and Canadian perspective

## INTRODUCTION

From ancient civilizations and oral singers to burgeoning nations and the mass media, the monomyth of the hero's journey helps to define, uphold, and negotiate cultural identity. North American television wrestling's central working-class myth expresses cultural identity on three basic levels: the popular, the American, and the Canadian. Being a worldwide television phenomenon, American wrestling programs cut across national boundaries to reflect values and beliefs shared by its global audience. Wrestling's core working-class myth appeals to a variety of international audiences because it parallels the almost universal heroic journey of ancient tales. Being American programming, television wrestling directly highlights the quest for the American dream, addressing and articulating a specifically American identity. America has a mass media identity industry that promotes the stories of great historical figures, popular entertainment heroes, and contemporary sports/political/artistic icons. The Puritan religious writers, political writers, educational writers (such as McGuffey and Alger), and adventurous dime novels feed into the modern identity industry of the American hero. Hence, wrestling heroes stem from, and are perpetuated through, a rich and active American identity industry. However, being composed of wrestlers from around the world, American programs indirectly also allow for regional, ethnic, or non-American voices, such as the Canadian. Without a strong identity industry to promote historical, popular, or contemporary heroes of its own, Canadian identity

is relatively marginalized and non-uniform. Nonetheless, the high-profile presence of Canadian performers and characters in American wrestling programs does promote a distinctly Canadian identity. The ancient heroic monomyth and wrestling's working class myth help organize the career journeys of Canadian wrestlers such as Bret Hart. Ultimately, the presence and success of Canadian wrestlers communicates Canadian identity on the global landscape by articulating a Canadian dream and a rebel hero figure. Thus, through the central working-class myth, professional wrestling defines, upholds, and negotiates cultural identity on three levels: the global, the American, and the Canadian. Ultimately, all three levels present us with a rebel hero character, whose function is to promote a unified cultural identity, while expressing an identifiable sense of tortured exile.

In the first section, the global appeal of wrestling will be explained through the parallel between Campbell's hero cycle and wrestling central working-class myth. Specifically, the wrestler's desire to achieve will be compared to the ancient hero's desire to be god-like; then, the elements of survival, chance, exile, heroic conflict, and excess will be established as key characteristics of a wrestler's journey; next, a wrestler's epiphanic awakening, symbolic journey into hell, and ability to summon supernatural strength will be explored. Similarities and differences between women in ancient heroic epics and women in wrestling will be briefly addressed; specifically, as threats, prizes, and heroic underdogs. Finally, the hero's death will be compared to the end of a wrestling character's or a wrestling performer's career.

In the second section, the Americanization of the heroic monomyth will be explored. American wrestling's central myth parallels and upholds the American dream of material and social success; the American dream is a popular script that

characterizes America's mass media identity industry. Essentially, America's identity industry is composed of two major aspects. So, first the historical standards that feed into modern American hero figures will be explored; this includes Puritan beliefs, ethical stories of success, and violent stories of success. Essentially, Puritan religious literature along with the McGuffey readers and Horatio Alger novels will be shown to establish the American belief that hard work and good ethics equals success. Then, the ambiguous morality, outlaw heroes, and brutal violence of dime novels will be shown to complicate the ideal of the American success story, allowing for morally tainted, self-serving, and gun-wielding heroes that appear in America's mass media. Second, America's current mass media identity industry will be briefly addressed. The mass media can be divided into three areas of hero story dissemination: the historical (Lincoln), the fictive popular (Roy Rogers, John Wayne, and Clint Eastwood) and the contemporary (Muhammad Ali). So, the historical roots of the American hero (from Alger and dime novels) and the current mass media depiction of (actual historical, fictional entertainment, and actual contemporary) heroes feed into professional wrestling heroes.

In the third section, the role of the Canadian figure in wrestling will be examined in detail. In essence, Canadian performers and characters provide a uniquely Canadian twist to wrestling's central working class myth. Canada does not have a powerful identity industry of its own and Canada does not have a uniform sense of national identity; nevertheless, Canadians participate in America's entertainment industry and thus articulate a sense of Canadian heroism. Contrasting with the American dream, the Canadian quest will be situated as a quest for survival. Canada's historical and cross-cultural quest for survival and the

historically-based Mountie figure feeds into modern Canadian wrestling heroes. Being in between both England and the United States, Canadian wrestlers gravitate from hero to villain according to their personification of pompous British superiority or down-to-earth American working class fraternity. Essentially, the tolerant, polite, and playful peacekeeping image makes Canadians more accessible international heroes than their patriotic American counterparts. On a global scale then, when compared to the more powerful Americans, Canadians are the underdog heroes for international markets. In addition, the high profile and high numbers of Canadian wrestling performers will be shown to feed into a relatively unified sense of heroic identity.

Finally, the link between wrestling's global, American, and Canadian appeal will be articulated through the rebel hero figure. Ultimately, the rebel hero functions as a means to promote a unified sense of cultural identity, while smoothing over and cathartically purging its audience of feelings of outcast and difference. In essence, the rebel hero champions difference and in doing so unifies the diverse viewers.

## THE HEROIC MONOMYTH

American professional wrestling programs appeal to audiences around the world because wrestling's central working-class myth easily translates across different cultures. In essence, wrestling's central story line corresponds to a narrative rooted in a great variety of nations, the ancient heroic journey. In *Companion*, Brunel declares "that narratives with striking similarities had appeared at different times almost everywhere on the planet. These were the 'lives of

heroes', of supermen, people halfway between the status of gods and ordinary men" (537). Wrestling's central working-class myth gives audiences hard-working talent which successfully endures a life of pain and obstacles in order to rightfully adorn the championship title. Interestingly, a large variety of cultures around the world tell a similar story rooted in their traditional heroic epics. Therefore, wrestling's international appeal stems from an ancient cultural identification with the myth of the hero's journey. Campbell, in *Hero With a Thousand Faces* describes the heroic journey in the following way: "The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation -- initiation -- return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth" (30). Capable of tapping into this monomyth, television wrestling successfully translates across a variety of national identities.

As with the heroes of such early cultural myths, wrestlers have a desire to achieve, develop their identity through their battles. In Brunel's *Companion*, the hero is said to be enacting the "the dream of excelling, the secret desire to be a god" (557). In wrestling, the struggle to prove oneself is evident in the perennial quest for victory, fame, and title belts. Of distinguished or semi-divine parentage, the childhood of the hero is privy to oracles, prophetic dreams, and other such phenomena. In wrestling, the childhood of a wrestler is hardly ever central to the story line; that is, no narrative concerns the growth of a wrestler from birth to adulthood. If there is mention of upbringing, the actual biography of the performer or the fictional biography of the persona is presented through fan magazines, special videos, or brief snippets within a broadcast. Actual biographies vary depending upon the performer's early life; however, fictional biographies are specifically designed to suit the persona. Hence, a cowboy character would be

billed as originating from Texas, a tanned surfer character from California, a mysterious masked monster from "parts unknown," and so on. Illustrious heritage in wrestling exists in two ways, from family name or from mentorship. If a performer comes from a family of wrestlers, then he is considered wrestling royalty. For instance, Bret Hart and Jeff Jarrett are both second-generation wrestlers, and The Rock is a third-generation wrestler. Family name precedes persona, earning wrestlers, on the one hand, instant recognition, and on the other hand, the often difficult task of proving themselves on their own merit. Illustrious heritage also stems from who a new wrestler associates with, or a type of mentorship. Paralleling the male-bonding evident in epic narratives, wrestlers strike up close friendships with one another. Often, a new wrestler is teamed with an established wrestler as a partner or sidekick, in order to help the new wrestler establish his character, garner fan respect, and to evoke three basic reactions. If the new wrestler receives a positive reaction, he is pushed as a hero; if negative, a villain; if indifferent, then the persona itself is adjusted through story development. In essence then, wrestlers have the desire to achieve; to establish or protect their family/personal honour.

Like his or her ancient counterparts, a wrestler's journey is characterized by survival, chance, exile, heroic conflict, and excess. The ancient hero's early life is one of survival and chance, usually brought on by abandonment; that is, parents may abandon their child. In comparison, family, friends, or business authorities may abandon the adult wrestler. Often symbolizing a state of exile, this abandonment almost automatically generates fans support. Since there are no story lines of children growing into wrestlers, the wrestler's early life of survival and chance refers to his entrance into the business or his entrance into a new

organization. Surviving the hardship and pain of competition, rivalries, and corrupt managers/bosses is a constant in wrestling story line. This survival can be clean or dirty. That is, if the wrestler survives such trials in a clean way, he is most likely considered a heroic character, a naive character, or a lucky character. If the wrestler survives such trials through corruption or trickery, he is most likely considered a manipulative villain; however, he can also be considered clever, and thus be identified as an intelligent hero. Chance also functions in the basic binary way of clean or unclean. Chance can give a wrestler the opportunity to earn a championship title, or chance can help the wrestler get away with deceit, cheating, or elaborate schemes. Most notably, a wrestler's success is defined by his conflicts with other wrestlers. The ancient hero is defined by his ability to survive or defeat seemingly indestructible enemies, such as dragons and monsters. Typically, a wrestler's key battle stems from a major betrayal or abandonment of some sort that leads to exile. This betrayal/abandonment may come from family, authority, or fans. For instance, in WCW, when the rival gang, the NWO, was created, fans were lead to believe that their hero Sting was a secret member of the NWO. The heroic Hulk Hogan had betrayed the fans and become the leader of the NWO and so it was highly plausible that Sting would join as well. Announcers made the accusations and fans were uncertain of Sting's allegiance. These accusations by WCW staff (such as the announcers) was a betrayal to the ever-loyal Sting, who disappeared for a while. When he returned, he dropped his colourful face paint and bright tights. Instead, he wore a black trench-coat and donned deathly white face paint, resembling the title character of the film *The Crow*. The accusations had killed the vibrant Sting; in his place emerged the darker Sting. This darker Sting no longer spoke. He dropped from the arena rafters into the ring area in

superhuman fashion, floating above the fans. Hulk Hogan became Hollywood Hogan, terrorizing WCW with his band of thugs. Sting would watch from the heights of the arena rafters like a gargoyle watching over a city, frightening the villainous NWO. This gargoyle state was Sting's exile from both WCW and NWO. He became an outsider and returned when it seemed that WCW would crumble to the powerful NWO forces. Sting finally faced defeated Hollywood Hogan at Starrcade on December 28, 1997. Sting became the new WCW heavyweight champion, signalling the beginning of a new year and rebirth for WCW. So, strengthened by a moment of exile, the heroic wrestler brandishes a charismatic self-reliance and self-confidence, pulling him towards a battle with a seemingly unbeatable foe. This is the high point of a feud, the climactic test of the hero's physical ability, mental capability, and inner resilience. Having defeated the monster, as Brunel puts it, "the hero appears as the 'saviour' of an entire people" (559). In wrestling, victory over successive ordeals ultimately leads to the heavyweight championship of the world. If the wrestler is a fan favorite, then he certainly is a type of fictional 'saviour' of the people. He has proven that hard work can lead to success and that one can survive betrayal/abandonment, and be strengthened by such emotional pain and social exile. However, as in wrestling, the sovereignty and pride of the ancient hero often leads to excess: "Intoxicated by greatness, the hero defies the gods themselves" (559). In wrestling, the hero becomes a villain, the new monster, terrorizing those with less physical, social, and material power; the hero betrays the fans and forgets the values that originally brought him clean success. This sets the working-class myth in motion once again, allowing for a new folk hero to arise and his or her journey is also characterized by survival, chance, exile, heroic conflict, and excess.

Somewhat similar to the ancient journey, wrestlers may make a symbolic epiphanic journey, signify a journey into hell, and summon supernatural strength. By being a terrorizing threat who has lost all compassion, the villain strikes a deal with a band of cohorts. The gang relentlessly torments the order of a wrestling program, interfering in matches, hurting innocent bystanders, or overtaking the corporate roles of the wrestling organization's president or owner. Often, the only way out of this villainous condition is for the wrestler to have an epiphanic moment, realize his wrongdoing, and rebel against his evil cohorts. The journey into hell is represented by a wrestler's persona. For instance, the WWF's Undertaker is a dark character, often bringing coffins ringside, speaking of death, and carrying an urn full of ashes. In WCW, Sting, by donning paint face similar to that of the title character in *The Crow*, signifies a mystical journey from or knowledge of hell in an almost ancient manner. Both the Undertaker and Sting have an ominous persona, seemingly haunting wrestlers from the afterlife. They are possessed by an unstoppable power, illustrated, for instance in the way they wrestle. For instance, after being struck by a move that would leave any average wrestler knocked out flat on the mat, the Undertaker jerks his body up into a sitting position, seemingly unaffected. And Sting endures a barrage of blows with a stone-faced expression, oblivious to the pain. In general, the hero often demonstrates this resilience to pain during the climax of a match, indicating that they have endured so much tragedy and torment that physical blows no longer have any impact. Clearly not a dark character, Hulk Hogan would summon a mystical sort of strength, trembling as he is filled up with a power that sparks the bout's turning point and earns him the victory. When characters such as the Undertaker and Sting make their allegiance to good and their allegiance to the fans

known, they have a greater potency than their cleaner and less ominous wrestlers. Representing a survival of the journey into hell, such characters have more depth and often more resiliency than the clear-cut hero, allowing for a wide variety of story possibilities. When heroes such as Hulk Hogan demonstrate the ability to be filled with a somewhat supernatural power that makes them impervious to pain, they illustrate a semi-divine ability. This ability, however, is not restricted to heroes. The most ominous wrestling monsters are impervious to or enjoy pain. The difference lies in the way this supernatural ability is embodied. Such monstrous villainous seem consistently impervious to pain and exercise their power in abusive and selfish ways. Heroes of any type usually only summon this power or are deemed impervious through the cheers and chants of the fans. Thus, although not dominated by a link to divine powers, wrestling stories allow for epiphanic moments, symbolic journeys into hell, and an ability to summon an almost mystical power.

Wrestlers also relate to women in a fashion somewhat similar to that of ancient journeys: they are both threats and prizes. Brunel says "In most cases the feminine world is presented as a threat to the brilliant fulfillment of the heroic task: the softness of the nest, spellbinding curves and opulence, warmth and seduction into inactivity" (561). In wrestling, female characters often sidetrack and manipulate male characters. And quite often, a woman breaks up a tag team partnership, a friendship, or even brothers. Representing the patriarchal bias of not only wrestling, but also ancient stories, women are temptresses, corrupting and manipulating men. For instance, in WCW, Kevin Sullivan was married to a lady simply known as "Woman" (Kevin Sullivan's actual wife, Nancy Sullivan). Woman betrays Kevin and becomes the girlfriend of a younger wrestler, Chris Benoit. This

sparked a long-standing and violent feud between Sullivan and Benoit. Like Helen's infamous ability to launch a thousand ships, "Woman" sparked a war between Sullivan and Benoit. Also, like Aeneas' abandonment Dido, wrestlers often betray their women in favour of duty. A wrestler's central duty is to become champion and if anyone, even his beloved, is in his way, he may leave her. Some wrestlers simply enter the ring accompanied with a new bevy of women for each match, signifying their sexual prowess. These wrestlers flaunt their sexual prowess, yet not many story lines have been developed from such a platform. However, other wrestlers have declared their love to one woman only to express their love to another woman later. Such deceit helps turn a wrestler into a villain, allowing the slighted woman to wreak revenge. For the most part, women are sex symbols, accompanying, tempting, or assisting their male counterparts; however, at times, they are significant figures in wrestling story lines.

Unlike the majority of ancient national heroes, some wrestling heroes are women. Although it is only a minor segment in a program, if there at all, female wrestling comes in and out of popularity during different eras; hence, the presence and function of female wrestlers depend upon audience taste and demand. Most notably, to the delight of fans, in the late 1990s, female wrestlers battled male wrestlers and won. The first intergender wrestling champion was Andy Kaufman, who wrestled women in the early 1980s as part of his comic routine. He easily defeated most of his female opponents, humiliating them and thus defining himself as a villain. However, in recent years, the notion of serious intergender wrestling has found a place in mainstream wrestling broadcasts. First in WCW, Jacqueline defeated Disco Inferno and then in the WWF Chyyna built her career by competing against and defeating male wrestlers. Reflecting popular culture's acceptance of

gender equality and fulfilling the role of the underdog, Chyyna has even won wrestling titles over men. In 1999 and 2000, certain intergender tag team matches help place male and female wrestlers on equal ground, for the duration of the match at least. There have been intergender tag matches in the 1980s, but they have become more common and more serious in recent years. One male and one female wrestler make up one intergender tag team; similar to a mixed doubles tennis match, one male and female team battles another male and female team. And in such bouts, a male wrestler often battles a female wrestler. Such matches could easily turn into a display of male brutality over women. However, by being typically smaller than the men, the female wrestlers are easily accepted as the underdog. In addition, by sustaining the punishment of wrestling moves, female performers earn the respect of fans, who often seem amazed by the pain a female wrestler endures and cheer when she successfully administers her own moves. One such move is "the great equalizer," which is a low-blow, that is, a kick or punch to the male wrestler's groin. "The great equalizer" was an illegal move used in desperation by male wrestlers; however, since female wrestlers use it in order to survive a match, the move becomes heroic. It is also a symbolic cultural gesture which communicates a sense of female defiance, power, and will to survive. Hence, such intergender battles are not necessarily one-sided matches or a spectacle of male brutality over women. So, women in wrestling are treated in a fashion similar to women in heroic epics, as threats and prizes; however, female heroes/villains have a place, although limited, peaking in the late 1990s. Hence, the status of women in the traditional heroic cycle has been successfully negotiated to include female heroes capable of competing against and defeating their male counterparts.

Despite the hero's resiliency, and like ancient epics, the hero's death is connected with either a betrayal or a decision to retire (or change a persona). In wrestling, betrayal is so common that it is an expectation. Audiences wait for betrayal and suffering to spark another struggle, another feud, or another conflict. Closest friends and family end up betraying one another; in wrestling, they must. Enacting the inability to trust anyone and reiterating the theme of self-reliance, a friend or family member often betrays the hero, causing defeat. In wrestling, the willing decision to die is also evident in retirement matches. The hero decides to gamble it all, his life as a wrestler, and promises to retire if he loses. The promise to retire is not necessarily literal; having his hair cut off, removing a mask, or giving up a girlfriend signal a similar type of career gamble. That is, the wrestler is gambling his persona or image. For instance, Gorgeous George promised to shave his famous golden locks if he lost a match; he lost and he shaved off his trademark. However, he wanted a rematch and gambled his wife's hair the second time; he lost and she shaved off her hair. So, due to the demands of melodrama, audience requests, and the promise of profit, the hero often does not retire, but his loss signifies a symbolic death. Most generally then, this is a death of a particular persona, a debilitating loss that ends a story line, or the indication of a new phase in the character's life. With ancient heroes, as Brunel says, "death is seen as a victory" (560). In wrestling, the "death" of a hero often leads to greater fame. Retirement matches usually involve legendary or popular performers and their loss is a loss to wrestling. Symbolically, their career is dead; yet, as I have alluded to earlier, surviving exile and returning to the ring makes a wrestler more heroic. Hence, coming out of retirement delights fans. This is a survival against all odds, doing the impossible and surviving the fictional death of retirement. The

stubbornness to keep on wrestling and to keep on proving oneself when one no longer has to earns fan respect. Moreover, the presence of a legendary performer reminds fans not to settle for less from the younger generation of wrestlers. The younger wrestlers must deliver themselves with the same relentless enthusiasm as their older counterparts. However, an older wrestler's refusal retire may become pathetic and parodic. In some cases, this can work humourously. For instance, the elderly Ms. Moolah, a long-time WWF female champion, is still performing in the year 2000; her age does not detract from her ring ability. Nevertheless, since she looks like a grandma, her feuds and matches take on a humourous quality. Hence, along with her geriatric partner/opposition Mae Young, the Fabulous Moolah provides some comic relief within WWF programs. Essentially then, the end of a wrestler's life is associated with the end of his or her performance career or change of persona. And, at times, by coming out of retirement, a wrestler may delight fans in either a serious way (securing the performer's status as an entertainment legend) or in a humourous way (as an older parody of his or her former self).

**THE AMERICAN IDENTITY INDUSTRY**

Overall, professional wrestling's central myth parallels the ancient heroic journey evident in several cultures around the world. Wrestling's central myth helps define a heroic identity that is available for a globally varied audience, in terms of race, age, and gender. Nonetheless, wrestling is also distinctly American. Hence, wrestling's central myth also parallels and upholds the American dream of material and social success, which in turn characterizes America's popular identity

industry. America's identity industry is composed of two major aspects. One, the historical standards that feed into modern American hero figures; this includes Puritan beliefs, ethical stories of success, and violent stories of success. Two, America's mass media presents historical, popular, and contemporary hero stories (that are systematically categorized in the Hero System Chart).

**Religious Utopia, Alger's Story, and Dime Novels**

Historically, America has created a cultural industry around the heroic monomyth in order to promote its own sense of collective identity. The United States is a diverse and vast cultural landscape, entrenched with regional, religious, class, and ethnic differences. Nevertheless, the United States has been able to unify the nation through an industry dedicated to distilling the heroic monomyth into a distinctly American success story. The American identity industry began with literature, through the work of early Puritan religious writers and political writers, through the idealistic work of Weems and Alger, and through the dime novels recounting the criminal violence of the frontier.

Justifying the split from England and attempting to promote a homogenous sense of nation, an American literary industry emerged that sought to sustain a uniquely American identity, based upon the quest for a utopia, the belief in universal rights, and the condemnation of unethical business practices and inhumane behaviour. In *American Declarations*, Bush states that Puritan literature of the eighteenth century promotes a specific homogenous sense of national identity, America as a utopia:

> From its beginning, American literary culture has fostered a view of the country as having a special

> purpose among nations. The Puritan founders viewed themselves as carrying the true light of life to the heathen nations and considered North America a "city set upon a hill," invoking the words of Christ. The "newness" of the civilization implied that it was also innocent and therefore capable of achieving the harmony and brotherhood of all humanity. (1)

Writers created a sense of special American purpose and utopia that feeds into modern patriotism, exemplified, for instance, by the colloquial slogan, "Love it or leave it." With the sanctity of a religious utopia forming the national consciousness, it is no wonder that such a slogan carries so much patriotic weight in wrestling today. Bush continues, explaining the effect of such early national literature: "Thus, as a result of the political and religious agendas of many of the country's early writers, the tropes of newness and regeneration became mythical elements that even by the outbreak of the Civil War had achieved wide resonance" (2). Hence, wrestling's central working class myth is a cycle, where the corrupted champion is challenged by a new hero, a clean and decent hero. When the new hero is corrupted, another rises in his or her place. In essence then, the Puritan utopia is a part of the deeply-rooted cultural significance of American wrestling's hero cycle.

Despite the fact that a nation was undergoing a deep internal crisis by the time of the Civil War, a national literature had promoted a utopia based upon human rights for all. For instance, by such literary and political standards, slavery would be wrong and would not fit into the American utopia and the Puritan ethic. Slavery, being the extreme of hard work and the most vile form of entrepreneurship, had to be both praised and condemned. Praise was due to the slaves themselves, who worked for nothing. They were the exploited victims, the

historical underdogs. Condemnation was due to the slave-owners, who were operating an unethical and lazy form of business. The opposition here between the hard-worker and the manipulative boss ties into wrestling's working class myth. During the era of Puritan religious literature, political principles of human rights were being forged, asserting the basic rights of man. Although it can be debated as to whether the early revolutionaries actually believed those rights belonged to all, regardless of race or gender, by insisting on their universality, America established a constitutional belief in a universally applicable principle. By coupling universal principles with a Puritanical condemnation of unethical or inhumane behaviour, the American principle of human rights for all surely existed before all Americans believed in it or were able to practice it. The notion of a Puritan utopia is itself an ideal application of principle to reality. America was struggling to define itself, to prove to itself, to England, and to the world that it could survive on its own. Thus, practicing any sort of hypocritical stance that would undermine a loving religious utopia and a universal declaration of human rights would undermine the American effort. Hence, the utopia and universality penned by early American writers and thinkers would take on a life of its own, helping to shape modern American ideals. In essence then, early in their history, a few basic elements of American identity emerged: the dream of a utopia, the Puritan praise for hard work, and the condemnation of exploitation. These few elements feed into professional wrestling's central working class myth, which is the story of a hard working individual who relies on his or her body to battle the hardship of exploitative bosses and corrupt authority figures. The hard-working wrestler strives to attain the utopian dream, to achieve fame and glory without being contaminated by temptation and self-serving power. In other words, the hard-

working wrestling hero, like Hulk Hogan in the 1980s, stood up for the rights of every human being, attempting to create a fraternity based upon the principle of universal human rights, rights first championed by early American religious and political writers. Nevertheless, these early religious and political writers were not the only influence on modern American wrestling heroes.

After the American revolution in 1776, American heroes began appearing in the popular literature of Weems and Alger throughout the nineteenth century. For instance, according to Fishwick in *Hero: American Style*, in 1800 Parson Weems published the *History of the Life, Death, Virtues, and Exploits of General Washington*, turning "Washington's life into a fairy-tale success story" (21). Early in its history, the United States developed and promoted a widespread industry of hero-worship, filtering away historical facts for the sake of upholding a collectively acceptable vision of the ideal American. In *Hero in America*, Wector points out that William Holmes McGuffey and Horatio Alger published the American success story throughout the nineteenth century, exerting a profound influence upon the American psyche. Concerning the McGuffey texts, Wector states:

> The McGuffey Readers, used in thirty-seven states of the Union from 1836 down to the close of the nineteenth century, sold the fabulous number of 122,000,000 copies. It is hard to exaggerate their effect upon the mind and culture of America . . . among famous Americans who studied them were Mark Twain, Lew Wallace, McKinley, Taft, Harding, Beveridge, Borah, James Whitcomb Riley, Gene Stratton Porter. Henry Ford is the dean of living devotees. (311)

A century of McGuffey's schoolbook stories taught children about what it was to be a good American. Moral stories taught lessons of honesty, warned children of negative influences, promoted the values of thrift. Wector continues:

> Mingled with these fables are stories about the Puritans of New England, Lafayette, and George Washington -- praised for his piety, dignity, and generosity to an unknown Philadelphia boy with a sick mother. As a distillation of McGuffey's teachings about success, one may take his *Fifth Eclectic Reader* of 1879. There we learn that too much native talent is a handicap, because it tends to laziness. Most worthwhile deeds are wrought by the diligent rather than the brilliant. (311)

In essence, American's were taught to respect the following notion: success stems from hard work. Horatio Alger's novels were a testament to this central belief, enjoying "a popularity never matched before or since" (313). Alger reduced the heroic monomyth to a metanarrative of success for young male readers, presenting the popular story of a simple and ethical individual achieving greatness through diligent effort. Hence, the nineteenth century literature of McGuffey and Alger put an American spin on the heroic monomyth, officially inaugurating the identity industry of the American dream.

Along with such nineteenth-century success fables, the dime novel helped to promote an adventurous but violent American hero. Illustrating the power of such dime novels, they "played a real part in the wartime psychology of the North. They were sent to camps by the millions, it is said, often bound in bales" (343). These novels were "grounded in rugged individualism, exalting the poor against the rich, the self-made against the silver spoon, the purity of the country against

the shame of the cities" (343). The self-made success story was a simple but popular and unifying script that celebrated the power of the individual to achieve greatness. Unfortunately, these adventure stories were not as ideal as they wanted to be. As Wector puts it, "Multitudes of redskins bit the dust, and the smell of gunpowder drifted on every breeze" (344). Such stories needed a clearly identifiable enemy and such stories needed the power and finality of brutal violence. Foreshadowing America's desire for explicit mass media violence, the "deeds of gore brought the dime novel into bad odor. It came to be the yellow-backed thriller which boys sneaked into their attic bedroom, or read in the hayloft -- a stimulant . . ." (345). In essence though, these books taught "loyalty, courage, and patriotism" (346). So, being somewhat forbidden made the dime novels all the more alluring, imbuing American patriotism with the spirit of rebellion from which the nation was founded. Early in its history then, America developed an accessible literary industry that served to unify a diverse collective under the image of the American ideal. Moreover, the dime novels made hero-worship a simultaneously deviant and patriotic activity; hence, worshipping the American hero was not simply one's national duty, but an exciting pastime. Much like wrestling today, the programming is aimed at young people, but parental advisory groups worry about and request wrestling programs to become more responsible and less violent. However, wrestling does not change; wrestling heroes remain both violent and deviant. As a result, young fans continue tuning into their violent television wrestling heroes, in a fashion similar to nineteenth-century youth with their forbidden dime novels.

**Mass Media Identity Industry**

From eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century roots, the American hero cycle has been represented in a multitude of forms, maintaining and expanding the American identity industry. Comic books, movies, television shows have all told the story of the American hero. The biographies of certain politicians, war heroes, athletics, musicians, and actors have been organized so as to fit the American hero cycle of material and social success. As an example, consider the three main cultural industries that promote the American hero: the historical, the popular, and the contemporary. A historically recognized American icon would be Abraham Lincoln. Jennings' *March of the Heroes* says "no public figure has been remembered, admired and venerated by his fellow Americans more than Abraham Lincoln" (168). From his poor country roots to his rise as the president of America, his biography closely parallels the Alger myth. Hard work leads to greatness and in this case, the greatness did not corrupt. Lincoln never forgot his humble roots; he is a man of great oratorical skills who would never consider it beneath him to speak with an average undereducated country bumpkin. Lincoln's death is a tragedy of mythic proportion. Plagued by a harsh political and personal life, he was shot while relaxing in a theater on Good Friday. Almost instantly, Lincoln became revered as a founding father figure, a martyr for an America without slavery. The American entertainment industry routinely champions a hero of its own. Roy Rogers, John Wayne, and Clint Eastwood encompass the twentieth-century's version of the dime novel's cowboy. Even though their specific characters are quite different from one another, they encompass the American cowboy figure pertinent to their respective eras. Albeit in differing ways, they all represent individual prowess and success, defeating their enemies with gunpower and violence. Their western films are like episodic adventures of the same

character, their specific cowboy personae. Each movie adventure is linked by their distinguishable identity. Ritually, their movies help rid America of a threatening enemy or a corrupt America, restoring peace through brutality. They are restorative founding father figures, healing a town ravaged by corruption and villainy. Such mass-media cowboys are combinations of the Alger story and the dime novel, simultaneously ethical and violent. Contemporary political, artistic, and sports figures also champion the hero cycle. Most notably, the story of Muhammad Ali in our popular culture reads like the ancient monomyth. From humble roots, Cassius Clay seemed destined for greatness due to a chance encounter with a policeman/boxing trainer. Clay trains hard and comes home an Olympic champion. Boxing critics did not believe this young Olympic fighter could attain professional success; but, Clay believed in himself and became the heavyweight champion of the world. Standing up for his beliefs, he changed his name to Muhammad Ali and refused to participate in the Vietnam War. Almost overnight, Ali became one of the most hated men in America and was punished by being banned from the boxing ring: this was his exile from the United States. He endured much suffering, eventually garnering support from college campuses around the country, rallying the people behind him. In doing so, he became a media icon for Civil Rights and the anti-war movement. Then, Ali made his return to the ring in epic heroic fashion and fought George Foreman. Following the heroic monomyth, Foreman can be understood as Ali's monster. As the older, weaker underdog, Ali fought a smart match, endured Foreman's punches and regained his throne as heavyweight champion of the world. Decades, he emerges a bonafide American icon in Atlanta to light the Olympic torch. Thus, since the American revolution, a cultural industry has worked to promote American identity

through the heroic success story. Even today, heroic stories of historical figures such as Lincoln, popular superstars such as Rogers, Wayne, and Eastwood, and actual contemporary icons such as Ali are told so as to preserve and uphold the American success monomyth. (For a closer look at the echoes of the ancient epic hero in popular American media heroes, see Appendix 1. For a categorized glimpse at the mass media identity industry, see the Hero System Chart in Appendix 2).

**Alger, Dime Novels, and Wrestling Heroes**

Due to the historical presence of the Horatio Alger story and the tales of heroic outlaws in dime novels, wrestling heroes spring from a truly American soil. More than two centuries of myth-making have enriched the garden of professional wrestling, while a popular array of historical, entertainment, and contemporary hero stories provide current nourishment. Such a cultural industry promotes a relatively unified collective consciousness, a national belief in the patriotic ideal. Hence, the ancient heroic monomyth is effectively Americanized into a success story. The rebellious American effort to forge its own identity and make it on its own is manifested by wrestling's individualistic quest for glory, honour, and respect. Wrestling heroes try to create a utopia through their own hard work, dedication, and effort; they strive to uphold universal human rights, while attempting to fight fair and rid the wrestling world of exploitative villains. In wrestling, Alger's bright dream of success merges with the dark spectacle of frontier violence; Alger's snow-white canvas of virtue is sprayed with bright splashes of blood. Paralleling the mythic American west in all its glory and all its shame, the path to wrestling success is littered with violence.

The wrestler's journey is a restless one; easily tired of one approach, a wrestler switches allegiances, changes persona, or moves on to another organization. Moving to the highest bidder was especially true of the original performers, when professional wrestlers were considered to be participating in the pay-for-play ranks. That is, before the age of long-term television contracts, wrestlers were paid only if they showed up and performed. In the smaller, local organizations, this still holds true. And in the larger organizations, a wrestler may not show up for a match if he or she protests the outcome or story line. For instance, *Wrestling With Shadows* chronicles Bret Hart's participation in a match which he believed would end differently. Vince McMahon, the promoter, told Hart what he wanted to hear, in order to ensure Bret Hart participated in the Survivor Series main event. In other words, in even the larger organizations, a wrestler may refuse to participate, illustrating the uncertain nature of wrestling events and story developments. Nonetheless, canvassing the countryside with spectacle and mayhem, even with hefty contracts and suitable story lines, a wrestler's life is literally a journey. This aura of constant movement is enriched by the historical American trait of restlessness, the continual search for riches. Wector in *Hero in America* points out that "Restlessness has long been the keynote of life in the United States" (181). The cure was to take a journey. "Travel was an anodyne for loneliness, disappointment, maladjustment, and poverty; at the horizon, all skies appear to lighten" (182). Thus, wrestlers live the mythic American trek westward, traveling from town to town, organization to organization, in search of glory; moreover, they embody the American quest through the rigours of the frontier.

The national American psyche can be symbolized by the idea of the frontier. Turner in *Frontier* explains:

> American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line. and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West. (2-3)

Historically significant to the American sense of nation, the notion of the frontier is a cultural myth. Slotkin in *Fatal Environment* asserts:

> The Myth of the Frontier is arguably the longest-lived of American myths, with origins in the colonial period and a powerful continuing presence in contemporary culture. Although the Myth of the Frontier is only one of the operative myth/ideological systems that form American culture, it is an extremely important and persistent one. Its ideological underpinnings are those same "laws" of capitalist competition, of supply and demand, of Social Darwinian "survival of the fittest" as a rationale for social order, and of "Manifest Destiny" that have been the building blocks of our dominant historiographical tradition and political ideology.

Echoing such sentiments, Atwood in "Survival" notes that every "culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core" (*Passion*,164). With such an assumption, she too makes the following claim:

> Possibly the symbol for America is The Frontier, a flexible idea that contains many elements dear to the American heart: it suggests a place that is *new*, where the old order can be discarded (as it was when America was instituted by a crop of disaffected Protestants, and later at the time of the Revolution); a line that is always expanding, taking in or "conquering" ever-fresh virgin territory (be it The West, the rest of the world, outer space, Poverty or The Regions of the Mind); it holds out a hope, never fulfilled but always promised, of Utopia, the perfect human society. (*Passion*, 164)

Atwood articulates a central feature of television wrestling: the promise that is never fulfilled, but constantly celebrated. In wrestling, old does replace new, just as good displaces evil. However, true to its serial melodramatic nature, the quest in wrestling is an everlasting one, a cyclical process that never ends. For whatever specific character-driven or narratively motivated reason, heroes become villains and villains become heroes, again and again, over and over. Menacing monsters turn into gentle giants who turn into mercenaries for hire, such as The Big Show. Inexperienced and wide-eyed wrestlers turn into arrogant thugs who turn into proud patriotic champions, such as The Rock. Pompous rich kids turn into humble heroes who turn into legendary fighters, such as "The Nature Boy" Ric Flair. Despite the myriad of story-specific reasons that propel the change from hero to villain, there is a historically American reason for such a constant transition.

The quest of an American wrestler is a moral one, made along the fine line between good and evil, a line originating in the ambiguous morality of the frontier. A hero one day is a villain the next; a scoundrel today is a champion tomorrow; the new and good replaces the old, which becomes good again and replaces the corrupt. The American cultural value of such a lack of solid character, for an absence of the steadfastly decent stems from the ambiguous nature of the characters from the historical American frontier, where even outlaws were heroes. By engaging with wrestlers who are morally ambiguous, Americans are addressing a morally ambiguous past. Like the old West, there are no absolute laws in wrestling. A reluctant sheriff may arrive to clean up the town, but in wrestling even he has a shady past and he surely will slip into a shady future. He must, to keep the American heroic cycle alive, maintain the notion that the new replaces the old. Thus, the quest for power and glory in the frontier is fraught with heroic villainy. The most violent, the most ruthless, and the most powerful rule the merciless frontier; consequently, in wrestling, as it may have been in the historical Old West, anger and apathy frequently triumph over skill and strength.

Although moments of fair matches between friends occur, the violence in wrestling is far from sportsmanlike. The violent struggle for power reveals the most vile aspects of human nature, such as betrayal and deceit; hence, wrestling violence is best defined as ruthless. As in the old west, every one fights for one's own survival. And the violence must be taken seriously by the competitors; if not, they become easy prey. Respect in wrestling, for heroes or villains, stems from a respect for brutal conflict. The inhabitants of the old west are said to have played with guns, but like wrestling, theirs was a serious play. Life was brutal, and survival did not simply mean enduring nature. American survival often meant

asserting violence which often resulted in death. Hence, the American quest for a new and better world is stained by violence. Possibly because of their revolutionary roots and the Civil War, Americans believe bloodshed is necessary to create a better life. This bloodshed need not be literal, but the theme of violent revolution by the heroic underdog is certainly prevalent. Moments of comic relief and parody do occur in wrestling, but just as the violence of the old west was ruthless, the majority of wrestling violence is ruthless. Ideal gunslinger types are present in wrestling, but they are rare and when they do appear, they do not last for long. Their decent glory gives way to the darker elements of human nature, even if they are still regarded as heroes. Even heroes cheat; in such a ruthless world, they must in order to win. For as in the Old West, this is every man for himself. In his quest for the American dream, the wrestler must be like the frontiersman who constantly watches his back and is ready to kill. Pure and decent values do not have a safe home in a world of ruthless survival.

The difference between a hero and a villain is a fine one; in fact, the clearest characteristic stems from fan approval or disapproval. (The structure of feeling of an era and a negotiation between promoters and viewers also play a role in the formation of heroes; for a brief glimpse of such issues, see Appendix 3). Defining fan tastes is difficult not only because of the numerous transformations a single character can go through, from hero to villain and so on, but also because of the majority of factors that help mediate fan taste, such as cultural temperament, political era, social happenings, and so on. Hence, a more simplistic fan-based test of fan approval and disapproval is relevant here. If fans cheer, a wrestler is a hero; if fans boo, a wrestler is a villain. Wrestling story lines and characters simply maximize the cheers and the disapproval by highlighting moments of heroism and

villainy. For instance, consider the humiliation of defeat. For a character the fans despise, defeat is a public execution. For a character the fans love, defeat is martyrdom. In either case, the ring action validates fan belief in American identity. American wrestling shows do travel outside of America to other countries such as Canada, England, and Australia. However, since the majority of shows are broadcast before an American arena audience, the role of validating American fans will be focused on here. A relatively unified belief in American identity can be demonstrated by fan approval/disapproval of the bloody defeat. The majority of humiliating defeats are not bloody, but blood is pertinent here because it illustrates the ultimate savagery of violence. When a villain is handed a bloody defeat, fans rejoice because ruthless violence is being celebrated. Blood is usually drawn by the use of a foreign object, a chair, brass knuckles, or, in cage matches, the cage itself. This heroic use of the foreign object echoes the dime novel's praise of gunpower and popular film hero's praise of firepower. For instance, in dime novels, brutal violence was achieved by the use of a weapon, usually a pistol or rifle. In popular films, American heroes often carry guns; for instance, Eastwood's Dirty Harry character is renowned for carrying the largest handgun in the world. In American wrestling, the use of a foreign object is not necessarily villainous, because foreign objects facilitate ruthless violence. Hence, with ample motivation, chairs, brass knuckles, and the cage itself can and is used as a weapon to draw blood. As a result, the villain is on public display, a justification of righteous American violence. In contrast, when a hero is handed a bloody defeat, fans become enraged and thus the ritual of revolution is invoked. The hero becomes a martyr for the American way, an America that quests for utopia, an America that believes in hard work, and an America based upon the universal laws of justice.

Tragic heroic martyrdom is common in wrestling, for it rallies fans to express their sorrow and outrage. Moreover, the martyrdom of defeat fuels future battles by insisting upon a rebirth of the hero. And in American wrestling, the rebirth of the hero is a rebirth of America, a chance for the most powerful country in the world to feel like the revolutionary underdog once again. Like the forbidden violence of early American dime novels, the rally cry of the suffering and bloodthirsty wrestling hero keeps the love for American identity alive, providing audiences with a taste of America's founding spirit of violent rebellion.

Ultimately then, a sense of national American identity is celebrated through the hero and villains of television wrestling story lines. Paralleling the ancient heroic journey, wrestling's central myth is given a uniquely American twist that is fueled by a historical industry of identity-making, illustrated by fan disapproval and approval of violence. Hence, wrestling's hero cycle is a means of maintaining a sense of collective identity, promoting the quest for the Puritan Utopia and the belief in hard work through a ritual a celebration of universal principle over exploitative power. Wrestling's violence is an outgrowth of the mythic American west, fraught with lawlessness and chaos, where survival means not only enduring nature, but enduring a life fraught with bloody violence.

**THE CANADIAN**

Despite such a deep-rooted and overwhelming sense of American identity, regional, ethnic, and non-American voices are not absent from American wrestling programs. In fact, a variety of national, cultural, and subcultural identities enrich professional wrestling, providing wrestling shows with the ability to reach a

diverse audience for a multitude of reasons. Hence, a hero to one audience can be a villain to another; or, a villain to one audience can be a hero to another. Canadian performers and characters illustrate the option for alternative readings. Canadian wrestlers participate in the ancient heroic cycle, the central working-class myth, and the American success story with a particularly Canadian twist, articulating a unique sense of Canadian identity.

As is apparent with the United States, a sense of national identity emerged after both two centuries of concerted literary effort and is currently sustained through a mass media industry which relates the stories of actual historical figures, popular fictional entertainment figures, and actual contemporary figures. Unlike Canada, a sense of philosophical difference pushed Americans away from England. Canada's relationship with England has been less antagonistic. To ensure a sense of American difference survived, stories of revolutionary leaders first emerged orally, but were soon written down for larger audiences. And today, America has a mass-media industry that helps sustain and promote a relatively coherent sense of national identity. This is not to say that Americans always had or currently have a more culturally unified sense of identity than Canadians. For instance, the Civil War illustrate America's violent inter-cultural differences and news reports of inter-racial conflicts in cities such as Los Angeles illustrate tense cross-cultural relations. Nonetheless, America's media actively promotes a sense of unified identity and thus helps to smooth over inter-cultural differences in favour of American patriotism. For instance, after the Civil War, stories and legends emerged that smoothed over differences and worked towards establishing a relatively unified sense of identity. In other words, through stories and folk tales, northern political figures such as Lincoln became heroes for an entire nation. To this day, Lincoln's

biography is revisited through books aimed at children and adults; moreover, film and television programs have routinely presented Lincoln as an ideal American hero, a founding father martyr. In contrast, Canada does not have a similar identity industry of its own; moreover, there is no distinct historical individual hailed and accepted as a national Canadian hero. Put another way, since Confederation, unlike the McGuffey readers and Horatio Alger stories, Canada has not promoted an ideal hero story for its youth. In addition, Canada does not promote a sense of national identity through its media; to make matters worse, Canada's mass media is not as powerful nationally as the American mass media is. Hence, Canadians have not latched onto a founding father/mother figure whose story can help promote a clear sense of national identity. In terms of not having a historical founding father/mother figure then, Canadians are identity orphans.

Nevertheless, the ancient hero cycle is pertinent to Canada's sense of identity when filtered through the American media because many nations, including Canada, participate in the process of creating hero stories. For Canada, the search for identity is a national obsession, one that is itself an indication of a unifying Canadian identity. In *Continental Divide*, Lipset says "National identity is the quintessential Canadian issue. Almost alone among modern developed countries, Canada has continued to debate its self-conception to the present day" (42). Despite its lack of established national heroes, Canadians do have a continually active identity industry. However, this fictive process largely takes place within American popular culture. In *Understanding Popular Culture*, along with the mass sale of a product, Fiske says, "To be made into popular culture, a commodity must also bear the interests of the people" (23). For Canadian viewers then,

professional wrestling is read through a uniquely Canadian lens. In "As Canadian as Possible," Bodroghkozy asserts the following:

> . . . popular culture functions as a terrain for the working through of social contradictions. It is a site, not where dominant (in this case, "American") ideology is triumphantly displayed, but rather, where it is negotiated, played, and struggled with, at times subverted, and, at other times acceded to. Mass culture texts become popular to the extent that they help socially situated readers work through fundamental dilemmas. They are the myths of elaborated capitalist societies. So, while it remains important to pay attention to what American, and increasingly global, culture industries "do" to Canada -- such as prevent the flourishing of an indigenous film industry, for instance -- it is also important to pay attention to what Canadians "do" with the products of those industries. (6)

This paper is not an ethnographic analysis of Canadian fan responses to the Canadian element in wrestling. So, the focus here is not on what Canadians "do" to the American wrestling product. Instead, since there are a multitude of Canadian characters and performers in wrestling, their identity-making role will be explored.

**The Canadian Dream**

If the American dream is achieving success, then the Canadian dream concerns but one thing, staying warm. American upward mobility contrasts the Canadian dream of simple survival. In "Survival," Atwood argues that the American symbol is The Frontier and the English symbol is The Island. In between the two nations, Atwood says "The central symbol for Canada -- and this is based

on numerous instances of its occurrence in both English and French Canadian literature -- is undoubtedly Survival, *la Survivance*" (*Passion*, 164). Atwood continues with the following:

> Like the Frontier and The Island, it is a multi-faceted and adaptable idea. For early explorers and settlers, it meant bare survival in the face of "hostile" elements and/or natives: carving out a place and a way of keeping alive. But the word can also suggest survival of a crisis or disaster, like a hurricane or a wreck, and many Canadian poems have this kind of survival as a theme; what you might call "grim" survival as opposed to "bare" survival. For French Canada after the English took over it became cultural survival, hanging on as a people, retaining a religion and a language under an alien government. And in English Canada now while the American are taking over it is acquiring a similar meaning. There is another use of the word as well: a survival can be a vestige of a vanished order which has managed to persist after its time is past, like a primitive reptile. This version crops up in Canadian thinking too, usually among those who believe that Canada is obsolete. (*Passion*, 164-165)

Finally, Atwood states that "the main idea is the first one: hanging on, staying alive" (*Passion*, 165). Elaborating on Atwood's English and French experience of cultural survival, the history of Canada's native population has also been one of survival. Within the popular media even, films such as Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* championed a story of arctic survival; the survival of the Native way of life and a human being's struggle to survive nature and the elements. Nanook's northern struggle was not a violent one against other humans, like those of the American frontier. Instead, Nanook struggled to survive in the most socially

barren sense of the term. This was Nanook struggling to feed himself and his family, to have hides to wear, and to build a place to sleep. For another example, consider Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens*, a novel for adolescents which also deals with the basic struggle to stay alive. In either case, the Canadian landscape is a character itself. The landscape is both beautiful and harsh, dangerous and cooperative. And this partly antagonistic and partly cooperative relationship to the landscape articulates the central Canadian symbol of survival. For survival is partly the task of enduring hardship and partly the task of making do with whatever resources one has. This is not the violent American quest to seize political power from the British, to compete for economic power against fellow business people, or to steal land from the native population. Survival in Canada is less about competition than it is about endurance and cooperation. As Atwood asserts, Canada abounds with such fictional and non-fictional stories of survival; however, building off Atwood, these stories are not limited to the French and the English.

Canadian survival stories are evident in not only fictional texts, but also in the real experience of Canadians. The marginalization of Canada's native population itself is a story of cultural survival. Echoing this sentiment of survival are refugee and immigrant stories of people fleeing tyrannical regimes or building a new life in a Canada. As examples, consider novels such as Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, Hiram Goto's *A Chorus of Mushrooms*, or Tara Singh Bains' *Four Quarters of the Night*; here, the subcultural struggle often involves understanding one's culturally distinct past, and the texts themselves are preservations of Canadian subcultural experiences. So, not only the English and the French, but also the native and ethnic population struggle to maintain a distinct language,

religion, and identity under the Canadian umbrella. The key word is "maintain." This is not a quest of domination, but one of maintenance; in a word, survival.

Ultimately, this Canadian symbol of survival ties quite nicely into wrestling's working-class struggle to survive. The Canadian theme of surviving a harsh northern life is closely aligned with wrestling's working class struggle. Most notably though, the Canadian vision of survival lacks the glorification of violence and guns evident in American dime novels and popular film heroes. Interestingly, the majority of Canadian professional wrestlers are not necessarily renowned for their bloody violence or use of foreign objects. Even though Canadian villains do use foreign objects, their use of a foreign object is more a trait of villainy than an indication of Canadian national identity. The American villain's use of a weapon can still be tied to the glorification of guns by dime novels and popular film heroes, and even the constitutional right to bear arms. What identifies most heroic or villainous Canadian wrestlers is a great technical wrestling ability. Canadian villains may cheat, use foreign objects, and draw blood at times, however, on the whole, they usually exhibit a high-level of wrestling skill. Hence, they often claim not to need any foreign weapon, because their bodies alone are capable of securing victories. Like the boy scout in the wilderness, Canadians must make do with what they have, in order to survive the wrestling landscape. Related to this resourceful boy scout/girl guide image of Canadian survival is the Mountie figure.

Globally, the most significant cultural image of the Canadian is the Mountie or peacekeeper. In a sense, without a definite historical figure to serve as a founding father figure (like America's Lincoln), Canada has a nameless, faceless father-figure in the Mountie/peacekeeper. In *Why We Act Like Canadians*, Burton says: "Over the years he took his place as a father figure . . . Incorruptible,

adaptable, courageous, courteous, kind (he had all the Boy Scout virtues, as well as the hat), the Mountie's comforting presence prevented our west from going wild" (28). In stark contrast with America's wild and violent west, Canada's frontier is characterized by an effort to maintain peace and respect between the First Nations, the American, the French, and the English. Today, the Mountie figure is embodied by Canadian peacekeepers seen on such American channels as CNN. Unlike the great American soldier who exerts violence and demonstrates power, Canadian soldiers are renowned as peace keepers. They aid countries in times of drought and famine; in other words, they help others survive.

The Mountie also feeds into the Canadian trickster wrestler. Historically, Mounties were soldiers acting as police officers. And our soldiers today are trained as warriors, but they act as peacekeepers. Burton points out that "The frontier Mountie was actually a soldier, disguised as a policeman by a shrewd prime minister who didn't want to annoy you Americans; had soldiers chased the whiskey traders back to Montana, it might have been considered an act of war" (28). This historical function as a peacekeeper feeds into the image of modern Canadian peacekeepers. In addition, since the historical Mounties were actually soldiers, a sense of trickery is evident in the Canadian character. This subversive trickery of the historical Mountie figure is particularly reflective of an intelligent heroics. The Mountie was acting for peace in a non-violent and intelligent manner, countering the ambiguous morality of American frontiersmen. Furthermore, being essentially nameless and faceless, the Mountie lacks the glorified persona of the American folk heroes. These elements of the intelligent and ethical underdog fit well into the Canadian character in wrestling. A multitude of Canadian wrestlers are renowned for their intelligent wrestling ability and technical prowess. For

instance, Bret Hart is a trained amateur athlete, a well-schooled submission wrestler, and a highly respected performer. After an era of larger-than-life characters such as the seven-foot and five-inches tall Andre the Giant or the heavily muscled six-foot and eight inches tall Hulk Hogan, Bret Hart cannot rely on his size or strength alone. Hovering around six-feet tall and true to his name, Hart must wrestle with intelligence and heart. In a world of bloody spectacle, his success stems from technical prowess and a relentless effort to survive for a win and not necessarily fame or glory. As for trickster figures, both "Rowdy" Roddy Piper and Chris Jehrico are silly wrestlers who mock and humourously undermine their opponents. During the 1980s, the kilted Piper was Hulk Hogan's antithesis; arrogant, loud, and brawling like a hockey player, Piper was the villain fans enjoyed hating. His presence enriched WWF broadcasts with a trickster element, humourously undermining Hogan's ethical patriotism. In the late 1990s, Jehrico played a humourous trickster figure on many WCW broadcasts. His combination of strong technical skills and humourous skits also made him an entertaining force, capable of not only poking fun at other wrestlers, but also himself. In essence then, the historical/international image of the Mountie/peacekeeper feeds into the Canadian wrestler's ethical image and trickster personae.

However, this ethical image may be easily tarnished by a sense of Canadian superiority and American bashing. So, Canadians are specifically suitable as wrestling characters because of their liminal status between the United States and England. Closely aligned with the United States, Canadians can be positioned as heroic sidekicks, fellow North Americans against the Russians or Arabians. For instance, the smaller Canadian Bret Hart battles and defeats the much larger Japanese sumo wrestler, Yokozuna, in 1994 at Wrestlemania X. Yokozuna was

terrorizing WWF wrestlers for some time, dominating his American opponents. In a sense, by being able to defeat the Japanese Yokozuna, Bret Hart was representing the prowess of all North American wrestlers. So, Hart was a fellow North American against a foreign power. The image of the ethical Canadian Mountie surviving the harsh northern wilderness fits into wrestling's praise for masculine values. The notion of enduring the harsh effects of weather and wilderness feed into Bret Hart's persona as the Canadian iron man. Hart is respected for his work ethic and for his ability to put his body through over twenty-five years of a full-time wrestling schedule. Essentially then, due to an American allegiance and the Canadian image of enduring a harsh climate, Canadian wrestlers can easily be developed into respectable heroes. However, due to a close identification with England, Canadians can just as easily be positioned as villains. The almost pompous sense of being ethically better than Americans easily situates a Canadian as a villain. For instance, during the late 1990s with the WWF, Bret Hart established the persona of the ethical Canadian wrestler who criticized the morally inferior Americans. Hence, he became a national hero within Canada and he had a legion of American fans who agreed with his critical stance. However, for the most part, he was viewed as a pompous villain in the States. So, depending on how they relate to American fans, Canadian wrestlers can easily be situated as either heroes or villains; or, as in the case of Bret Hart, a Canadian wrestler can be both a hero and villain, being viewed as a hero by some fans (non-American and American) and as a villain by others (mostly American fans, but also non-Americans as well).

The internationally renowned image of the Mountie in a clean and bright red uniform reflects the rigidity of British uniform and humourously undercuts the

rugged and impromptu struggle for wilderness survival, but it does not undermine Canadian pride. Uniforms suggest order, structure, and rank, while the struggle for survival suggests being ready for anything, getting dirty, and not paying attention to order, structure, and rank. This cultural correlation between Mountie and wilderness, between a fashion-based dignity and a wild and rugged masculinity is almost ludicrous. Culturally, the American image of the hard-working individual is not associated with keen fashion and bright uniforms. Such a pairing of fashion and masculinity is silly and also feeds into Canadian wrestling characters who may be laughed at for their perceived sense of ethical superiority and keen eye for uniform or fashion. For instance, WWF's Rick Martel, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, played a narcissistic character who was obsessed with his own good looks. Tying into the narcissistic character established by Gorgeous George, the Canadian association with British superiority and regimentation allows for the Canadian also to be positioned as a villain. Thus, with an identity that is historically linked with England and currently linked with the United States, Canadians can hover back and forth between villainous and heroic roles for American audiences. However, while the American character's switch from hero to villain indicates the moral ambiguity of the frontier, the Canadian character's switch from hero to villain indicates an allegiance to either the upper-class English image or the working-class American image. Moreover, Canadian wrestling characters who poke fun at their own national identity are not necessarily negative. In "Mounties, Muggings, and Moose," Gilbert points out that "Canadians do not destroy their culture by laughing at it; instead, they affirm it in a complex, inverted manner" (*Beaver Bites Back*, 192). In other words, when seriousness and ethical superiority (from the Mountie and the British) are treated as villainous or silly in American wrestling

programs, Canadians may still enjoy it. Moreover, the ability to laugh at themselves and not be as rigidly patriotic as America feeds into the Canadian image of tolerance and politeness.

In essence, the tolerant, polite, and playful peacekeeping image makes Canadians more accessible international heroes than the patriotic American heroes. Despite performing a villainous, heroic, or comic role, Canadians are well-suited to an overall identity as underdogs, due to the global economic and militaristic power of America. Consider Freedman's analysis of capitalism in wrestling in Ontario. Concerning wrestling's working-class view of capitalism, in "Will the Sheik," Freedman declares:

> There is a moral and political battle going on. Not between two individuals but between two explanations of how individuals fare in their daily affairs; one is the *ideology* of capitalism--that is, that all men are equal in the market place--the other, the *practice* of capitalism--that is, that good, honest men are at a distinct disadvantage. They are significantly very different. The ideology of capitalism, that is democratic liberalism, is attested to only by exceptions which miraculously prove the rule, exceptions such as the odd, decent fighter Dominic Denucci, who wins. Greed, the practice of capitalism, is what really prevails over human behavior. It is a painful lesson, dark and truthful: that nice guys really finish last, that the ideology of contemporary western society is a failure. (*Celebration*, 76)

Even though the working-class struggle is still pertinent to wrestling, mainstream American wrestling has modified it so as to make wrestling less tragic and more uplifting. Hence, the Horatio Alger story of success and achievement often

overshadows the story of the working man's life of pain, suffering, and tragedy. Moreover, working-class views of capitalism are marginalized by the wealth of advertising in wrestling shows. Ironically, pay-per-view events, 1-900 phone lines, and wrestling merchandise advertisements exist alongside wrestling's working-class myth. This may be due to two reasons: one, Freedman's oversight; two, the American identification with the underdog. First, Freedman himself may have been over-estimating the working-class relevance in American wrestling. That is, even though Freedman spoke of wrestling in general, his experience is almost exclusively with small-town Canadian events in the mid-1980s. Hence, he may have over-applied such a socialistic working-class perspective to American audiences. Nonetheless, wrestling story lines and conflicts tell us that there is a strong working-class myth central to professional wrestling. Secondly then, even though programs are fraught with advertisements and self-promotion, the story of working-class struggle is revered because it celebrates the American underdog. Hence, the tragedy of the working-class must exist alongside the highly self-promotional broadcasts because the working-class underdog character maintains the American dream myth. On a global scale though, when compared to the more powerful Americans, Canadians are the underdog heroes.

Hence, Freedman's contrast between the ideology and practice of capitalism can be expressed through a comparison of American and Canadian economic systems on a whole. America's overall economic success and military prowess contrasts Canada's relatively marginalized economy (more cooperative than competitive) and minimal military (more helpful than aggressive). For Canadians and other economically or militarily weaker nations, America's financial success does not necessarily mean that America is a better country. Adapting

Freedman to the global landscape, the ideology of capitalism can be distinguished from the practice of capitalism. With less crime, less financial disparity, and a more equitable health care system, many Canadians believe that they are living in the better country, the more ethically "good" country. America enjoys more economic, military, and global power; hence, America is the best player in the game of capitalism. However, for Canadians at least, Canada is the better country to live in. If America prides itself on providing unalienable rights and freedoms, Canada prides itself for providing the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. This is not to say that Canada is without any serious problems in the area of poverty or the homeless. Rather, this does illustrate that Canadians believe they place greater value of the average person's right to have the basic necessities than America does. In the States, the image of a lone individual hunting for his family on the frontier is the standard; by way of contrast, in Canada, the hunt can be viewed as more of a collective process. For instance, the image of the natives bartering with the French and English is more apt in Canada, than the lone pioneer stalking the prairie. Because Canada has traditionally spread its wealth and resources to those regions in need, the image of early native tribes sharing their bounty with one another at potlucks is more pertinent to the Canadian identity. In effect then, Freedman's distinction between the ideology and the practice of capitalism can be applied to American and Canadian relations. Capitalism is a failure not only to working-class Americans, but also to less economically powerful countries, such as Canada. Hence, Canadian wrestlers may symbolize the anti-American underdog for global audiences. To illustrate, consider Bret Hart's wide-ranging global appeal as a hero. In the mid-1990s Germany voted Bret Hart one of the best athletes in the world. And while he was WWF's heavyweight

champion (America's favorite performer), he was a national hero for Canadian fans, and praised by European and Asian fans as well. On a worldwide scale then, Americans are representative of the rich and powerful, while Canadians are representative of the hard-working underclass struggling to survive. As a result, Canadian wrestling heroes are more accessible international heroes than their overly patriotic American counterparts.

Along with this general role of Canadian characters, the high-profile presence of a great number of Canadian performers in American wrestling allows for a subversive sense of celebrating Canadian identity. Published in 1996, Pevere and Dymond's *Mondo Canuck* is a book entirely devoted to the Canadian presence in North American popular culture; they note that "when one begins to list the names of Canadians who have made an impact on global entertainment over just the past few years, the results are nothing short of staggering" (ii). Unfortunately, Pevere and Dymond fail to mention any high-profile professional wrestlers. Nonetheless, like the Mountie was a soldier in disguise, Canadians can pride themselves on having so many American entertainers who are originally from Canada or still reside in Canada.

Since Canada is a multicultural landscape for many Canadians, a sense of difference derives from one's own comparison with his or her neighbour. French, English, First Nations, and a multitude of ethnic, religious, and national identities make up the Canadian mosaic. The struggle to maintains a unique sense of cultural identity is often achieved through comparison, while the acknowledgment of basic human rights is articulated through tolerance, politeness, and respect. In other words, Canada tends to believe in the principle of being different, but equal. The Edmonton Heritage Days festival is a local event of both comparison and

tolerance. Comparison because tents are set up next to one another, housing different cultural identities. Tolerance because the tents are side-by-side, participating ritually together to celebrate their difference. On a more international level, a similar effort to celebrate and maintain a sense of Canadian difference is attempted. Surrounded by more distinct national identities and stronger historical heroic figures (compare Lincoln with the generic Mountie), being Canadian is about being different, putting a face on that faceless Mountie peacekeeper. That face is often a white face, if one takes the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) turban controversy into account. Nonetheless, as in the States with Civil Rights, the principle of religious freedom was upheld and Canada's internationally-respected image of tolerance was upheld when the RCMP admitted a turbaned Sikh officer. Like the States with their universal principles, when confronted with such identity-issues Canadians have not only universal principles to live up to, but also a globally-renowned image of tolerance to maintain. Moreover, Canada has the advantage of learning from America's mistakes, especially in terms of dealing with racial or any other subcultural differences. Hence, officially, the boy scout hat is not the magical source of ethics in Canadian Mounties; rather, with the acceptance of a turbaned Sikh officer, the honourable reputation of the RCMP has more to do with the elusive quality of integrity and the ability to survive RCMP training. Moreover, even though the majority of Canadian figures in the North American mass media are white, the existence of non-white Canadian people and the existence of minority religions has been at least legally acknowledged in Canada with the decision to allow Sikh RCMP officers to wear turbans. In other words, Canadian identity was successfully prevented from being reduced to the material image of the Mountie's dress. Instead, Canadian identity was allowed to

remain elusive and non-material. So, Canadians are not without their own set of racial, religious, and ethnic tensions; nevertheless, the very sense of difference that distinguishes one Canadian subculture from another also distinguishes Canadians on a whole from the rest of the world.

One avenue of expressing a sense of national difference is made through Canadian performers in the American entertainment industry. For instance, Canadian Lorne Greene played the quintessential American father figure in television's *Bonanza*. Or Canadian William Shatner played the captain of the Starship Enterprise on *Star Trek*. This Canadian presence on American programming is akin to the subversive pleasure of having a soldier dress as a Mountie. For instance, Greene's presence on the American frontier and Shatner's presence in space permits a Canadian reading of both programs. In essence, the presence of Canadian entertainers in American media proves that although Canada does not have as powerful an entertainment industry as the United States, individual Canadians do achieve the American dream of material and social success. By being Canadian, their success is a subversive victory that not only instills pride in Canadians, but also situates the successful Canadian as a trickster hero; that is, the American success story is achieved by a Canadian in disguise.

If Canadians are identity orphans, when a Canadian achieves the American dream, he or she can be compared to the cartoon character Annie finding a home with Daddy Warbucks. That is, Annie does not just find a home; rather, she finds a rich and powerful protector; moreover, she even softens him up a bit. So, the victory for Canadian entertainers is dual. One, they attain high-profile and often international success. Two, they can exert some influence on the American entertainment industry. In wrestling, during the 1980s, "Rowdy" Roddy Piper's

high profile presence helped inject wrestling with a brawling style and comic insults. In the 1990s, Bret Hart's high profile presence helped inject wrestling with more technically competitive bouts, promoting a style of highly-skilled choreography and physical story telling. Even though this Canadian influence on the American entertainment industry is limited, the Canadian influence usually feeds back into an ethical Canadian image. For instance, William Shatner's presence on *Star Trek* is made all the more Canadian by the fact that he ran a multi-cultural ship. The multi-cultural aspect was the series' originator's idea, Gene Rodenberry; however, since Shatner is Canadian, his association with a multi-cultural ship lends itself to the national notion that Canadians are more tolerant of ethnic difference than Americans. (Shatner did helm a ship that included a black woman, an Oriental man, and even a man with pointed ears). When Canadianized, the monomyth of the ancient hero is manifested into an intelligent and ethical hero who is somewhat of a trickster and whose journey takes him or her to the top of the American entertainment industry.

There are a high number of high-profile Canadian performers in wrestling. Over the past fifty years, legendary Canadians such as Gene Kininski, "Whipper" Billy Watson, "Whipper Billy Watson Jr., "Tiger" Jeet Singh, Jacques Rougeau Sr., and Stu Hart represented some of the best of Canadian wrestling talent known around the world. And today, "Rowdy" Roddy Piper, Bret "Hitman" Hart, "Tiger" Ali Singh, "Crippler" Chris Benoit, Lance Storm, the Rougeau brothers, Val Venis, Edge and Christian, Chris Jehrico and others are or have been highly visible on North American wrestling programs. Despite working as different characters and for different organizations, there are three basic similarities that define these Canadian performers. One, most of them are respected as actual athletes before

they became wrestlers. Kininski was a former football player and Bret Hart was an amateur wrestler. Two, they are not necessarily giants. Most of them are around six-feet tall. Three, more importantly, they display a high-degree of intelligent technical wrestling ability. Aside from Piper, most of these performers display a high-level of athleticism and technical skill. And even though he is a brawler, Piper wrestles with a trickster cunning as much as he does with his fists. Even the bigger men, such as "Tiger" Ali Singh, do not rely on size and strength alone; for instance, Ali Singh is a highly competent technical wrestler as well. Along with these three basic characteristics, a specific ethnicity or family legacy often characterize these performers. Piper wears his Scottish kilt. The Rougeau brothers and Rick Martel are proud French Canadians with thick accents. "Tiger" Ali Singh is an Indo-Canadian who follows in the footsteps of his father "Tiger" Jeet Singh. Bret Hart and his brothers have followed in their father Stu Hart's footsteps as well. So, ethnic identity is preserved, while familial ties are honoured. Overall then, the high-profile presence of Canadian performers permits Canadian readings and promotes a unique sense of Canadian identity. Their respect for family legacy and high-degree of technical skill make Canadian wrestlers heroic for not only Canadian, but also American and international audiences. In essence, being smaller in size and power as a nation and being smaller in size and power as performers, Canadians are well-suited as underdogs. However, their sense of Canadian identity or origin separates them from their American counterparts; Canadians are outsiders. Nevertheless, this combination makes Canadian wrestlers heroic underdog outsiders; hence, Canadians are easily identifiable as rebel heroes.

**REBEL HEROES**

Summing up the wrestling hero requires an explanation of the rebel hero's role. Wrestling's central working-class myth is a popular manifestation of Campbell's hero cycle, allowing the monomyth of the hero's journey to transcend cultural and national differences. Ultimately, the global, American, and Canadian perspective present a rebel hero character, whose function is to promote a unified cultural identity, while expressing an identifiable sense of tortured exile. The hero of Campbell's monomyth is the basis of the rebel hero, a figure who must endure social exile and achieve success through life-threatening tests and battles. American wrestling heroes stem from a two main sources. One source is the revolutionary religious/political literature, the McGuffey readers and Horatio Alger stories, and the violent dime novels. The second source is America's mass media's current avenues for heroic stories; hence, wrestling heroes exist amongst an entire industry of historical, fictive, and contemporary heroes applauded and revisited by the mass media. American wrestling heroes build upon the monomyth's exile and present us with rebellious heroes. Oppressed by evil bosses and manipulated by corrupt officials, rebel heroes do not even have a home within the wrestling world. For instance, Vince McMahon, the owner of the WWF, tries to censor, ban, and seize the heavyweight championship away from Stone-Cold Steve Austin. All of McMahon's torture makes the outsider Austin into more of a revered hero. Austin's lack of acceptance and lack of respect is a cathartic outlet for the multitude of fans who may themselves feel like misunderstood outcasts. And, Austin's ability to defeat and humiliate McMahon is also a cathartic outlet, albeit an inspirational one, proving that the lone individual can achieve and overcome all obstacles. Hence, the exile of the ancient hero ties into the status of wrestling's

modern rebel hero figure. In essence, the rebel hero addresses feelings of individual exile, communicating to those fans who may, if only at times, feel like outcasts. The rebel hero allows for the vicarious experience of being considered the outcast and underdog and through such a role unifies the collective regional/subcultural viewership under the common association with the champion outsider.

Within the American mass media in general and wrestling programs in particular, the figure of the Canadian hero helps articulate and celebrate a sense of national difference. On the periphery of popular culture, Canada is a country of exile. The harsh/cooperative landscape along with the image of the ethical peacekeeper are just a couple of elements that feed into Canada's heroic identity. Within American wrestling, Canadians are outsiders, underdogs, and hard workers; hence, they are well-suited to the role of rebel hero. Just as a national rebel hero may allow for a cathartic unity amongst American fans, so Canadian heroes allow for a cathartic unity amongst international fans. Through the Canadian rebel hero, international fans can experience a sense of triumphing over the most powerful capitalistic and militaristic superpower. The technical skills, respect for family legacy, and playful trickster characteristics of Canadian wrestlers earn the admiration of fans worldwide. As a result, the Canadian figure also allows for the vicarious experience of being considered the outcast and underdog and through such a role unifies the collective international/multi-cultural viewership under the common association with the champion outsider. Keep in mind, however, that the Canadian is only one such figure of non-American difference. Wrestling is full of non-Americans, foreigners, and ethnic characters. When one becomes a heroic champion, he or she may do much the same as the Canadian examples being

discussed here and provide a sense of pride for his or her community or, at the very least, for his or her fans. For instance, the Black-Samoan wrestler the Rock is American. However, he also represents Samoan culture and Black American culture; thus, his status as a heroic champion may speak specifically to certain American and international subcultures as well as to his mainstream fans. Therefore, the Canadian's ability to represent a wide-variety of American and international viewers is an ability of white and ethnic American and non-American heroic champions as well. The examination and contrast here between the Canadian and American hero helps elucidate this role of wrestling's hero. Hence, the Canadian hero figure helps articulate a sense of national difference, while still speaking to a wide variety of American and non-American viewers.

Despite the differences between the global, the American, and the Canadian hero figures, then, one unifying model predominates: the rebel hero. Global, American, and Canadian audiences admire the rebel hero because human beings are highly interdependent social beings. Having the longest nurturing period of any species, we are raised to become self-reliant, independent adults; but, even as adults, we encircle ourselves with social groups, such as friends, colleagues, and family. Nations forge trade alliances, hold global conferences, and most simply, require one another to exist as they do. This interdependence and cooperative coexistence is our social reality, the factual backdrop for our fantasy of the ideal rebel hero. The rebel is the embodiment of self-reliance and independence, capable of not only surviving life in exile, but often choosing such an existence. Nonetheless, despite this desire to traverse the margins of society, the rebel exemplifies the values that form the culture's central beliefs. Being the national

ideal, wrestling's rebel hero is an outsider most reflective of a society's ideological insides.

According to professional wrestling, there are many dangers one must face, but many problems stem from the risk of being in social/personal relationships. Stumbling into a dispute, however trivial, is more likely to occur with the greater number of relationships we forge. In addition, the closer we become with another person, the greater the trust, and hence, the greater the harm if that trust and friendship is betrayed. In other words, since the trust level is progressively raised and strengthened when people become closer to each other, there is a greater risk of being seriously hurt, especially through a betrayal of some sort. On the ledge of our social lives, suffering is just inches away; a slight misstep, betrayal is the shove that causes our emotional fall. In wrestling, this fall is an exodus of suffering, shattering the impossible dream of safe social relationships. Wisely outside the realm of relationship lurks the rebel figure. Privileged by an outside view of such a cycle of social suffering, the rebel hero strikes alone. Entering the wrestling ring on the strength of his own body, mind, and soul, the rebel hero is a menacing force. Charged with charisma, his eyes burn through his adversaries, his voice echoes throughout the arena, calling upon the strength of the people. And, when in such an elevated mode, his action is swift and decisive. Independent, courageous, powerful -- this is the rebel hero.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, wrestling's central working-class myth speaks to global, American, and Canadian audiences in differing, but inter-related ways. American

wrestling programs are a worldwide television phenomenon, because they can cut across national boundaries to reflect values and beliefs shared by its global audience through the parallel between wrestling's working-class myth and the ancient hero cycle. American wrestling heroes are an outgrowth of two hundred years of hero-making, evident in the Puritan religious writers, political writers, educational writers (such as McGuffey and Alger), and adventurous dime novels. In addition, America's mass media industry of historical, fictive popular, and actual contemporary hero stories sustains and promotes the modern American success story. Usually, such stories present audiences with the rebel hero figure. Within America's mass media industry, Canadian performers formulate a sense of their own national identity. The high-profile status and proliferation of Canadian performers in wrestling help express a sense of Canadian identity, based upon survival, peacekeeping, and comic playfulness. On the global scale, Canadians become the underdog champions, in contrast to the more powerful and patriotic American wrestlers. Overall, the exiled hero of ancient monomyths becomes the modern rebel hero figure. In America, the rebel hero celebrates individualism through his or her suffering, endurance, and triumph. Canadian do much the same for international audiences, representing the ability for other non-American or ethnic American wrestlers to do the same for their respective communities or legions of fans. Essentially, the rebel hero is a social outcast, whose outsider's perspective affords him or her the luxury of not falling prey to social allegiances that often end in betrayal. The rebel outsider is our individual ideal, a mortal with the inspirational power and almost supernatural capability to survive, endure, and thrive.

# CONCLUSION: WHOOO!

In the first chapter, wrestling's cultural status as "fake" was thoroughly addressed. General notions of high art were contrasted with general notions of low art; in particular, the existence of both high television and low television was examined. Then, wrestling's historically fraudulent reputation was charted. Viewing wrestling was considered an uncomfortable cultural activity, because of wrestling's liminal status as entertainment; that is, wrestling exists between sport and drama, between masculine narrative form and feminine narrative form, between a sexual and non-sexual display of human form, and between documentary reality and creative fiction. In addition, wrestling's spectacular excess, wrestling's media-hybrid form, and wrestling's reappropriation of its culturally-assigned con-game all contribute to wrestling's "fake" status.

In the second chapter, a thorough textual analysis of professional wrestling programming has been conducted. Building upon sports, wrestling is physical story telling. Building upon drama, wrestling is mythic ritual, carnivalesque theater, and serial melodrama. Most importantly, wrestling presents a central working-class myth, a limited form of carnivalesque, and an action-packed soap opera. Building upon narrative, wrestling utilizes both covert and overt narration. Covert narration includes directing techniques, editing, lighting, and so on. Overt narration specifically refers to the announcer's role, but includes all sound elements. Hence, wrestling was systematically identified as a hybrid-form, which emphasizes one element or the other, depending upon the promoters'/producers' aims, the audience's tastes, and the program's success.

In the third chapter, I explored wrestling's hero figure. Wrestling story has a global appeal because the central working-class myth echoes the ancient hero's monomyth. The modern American hero is an ideal embodiment of qualities promoted by Puritan religious writers, Horatio Alger novels, and dime novels. The popular American mass media circulates heroic stories of historical figures, popular entertainment figures, and contemporary figures that help to promote a coherent sense of American identity. Nevertheless, recipients of American wrestling programs are open to making their own culturally-based interpretations of wrestling story and characters. Hence, Canadian identity within American wrestling was explored. Overall, global, American, and Canadian wrestling heroes are rebel heroes. On the one hand, rebel heroes are an outlet for pain, articulating a sense of exile and difference felt by the individual viewer; on the other hand, rebel heroes are an outlet for prowess, articulating a sense of international, national, or subcultural pride, smoothing over differences through the ideal rebel hero figure. Hence, intent on expressing such power and pain, the rebel hero cries out: "Whooo!"

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## APPENDIX 1: Echoes of the Epic Heart

The epic hero's greatest honour is to win everlasting fame, to echo unforgotten throughout time. Even though epic poetry is no longer our most popular form of entertainment, epic narrative elements and heroic personae continue to resound in our popular imagination; the legacy of Gilgamesh, Achilles, Odysseus, Rama, and Aeneas lives on in our popular culture. Audiences revel in the heroism of Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*, Harrison Ford's everyman, and the media legend of Muhammad Ali. Such popular figures do not fit mechanically into the conventions of traditional or literary epics; however, there are significant commonalities from which a comparison of ancient heroes with modern heroes can help illuminate what it takes to be a hero. For instance, *Braveheart* is a historically based epic film about the passionate martyrdom of William Wallace; it is a modern isolated text which utilizes epic traces most neatly. However, we continue to have other popular versions of the ancient epic hero, fictional and non-fictional. Every year, the recurring reluctant hero persona of Harrison Ford is forced to cleanse the world of corruption and criminals; so, Ford is a ritual celebration of justice and freedom. Finally, in terms of real-life heroes, the media narrative of Muhammad Ali captivates audiences, formulating a legendary hero for our times. Thus, even though epic poetry has largely faded from the minds of mass audiences, its echoes can still be felt in popular heroic narratives and figures.

For the first example of a historically-based hero, Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* will be examined. William Wallace as a founding father figure, de Vries's epic narrative conventions, and the passionate fuel for his heroic quest will be discussed. In addition, William Wallace's persona will be compared with the character traits of epic heroes such as Gilgamesh, Achilles, Odysseus, and Rama.

For the second example of a popular fictional hero, Harrison Ford will be examined as a restorative founding father figure. Ford's rebel everyman persona will be compared to Aeneas in terms that both encompass a divided ideal and representing our social psyche. Then, Ford will be shown to function as a ritualistic mass media confirmation of the honourable heart. Finally, Muhammad Ali's media narrative as presented by *A & E's Biography* will be analyzed by drawing upon de Vries's heroic cycle. Proving we still have the thirst for real heroes, Ali will be situated as a Civil Rights founding father figure, as a warrior-poet persona, and as proof of the heroic heart's capacity to survive and succeed. Thus, a descriptive survey of *Braveheart*, Ford, and Ali will effectively display echoes of the ancient epic bard's in our modern media.

According to Abrams in *Glossary*, an epic is a long narrative poem on a serious subject with a heroic figure "on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race." Hence, the hero is of national importance or even cosmic importance and performs superhuman deeds in battle (53-54). Ancient Greek stories of Hercules, Achilles, and Odysseus are fraught with elements of the divine and supernatural. Often ancient heroes are themselves semi-divine. By adorning the throne of national founding father figure, such heroic figures associate their people with a divine source. Although his father is human, modern historical heroes such as *Braveheart*'s William Wallace quite often attain a national importance. As Merchant mentions in *Epic*, epic narratives relate "to history on the one hand and to everyday reality on the other" (1). In other words, an epic is an account significant to a culture's identity and a text designed for general entertainment. In such a way, *Braveheart* is both the celebration of a national Scottish hero and an entertaining action-romance. In terms of celebrating Scottish

history, the hero William Wallace is constructed as a founding father figure, much like Gilgamesh, Rama, or Aeneas. As Mack et al. tells us in *Norton Anthology*, Gilgamesh's narrative is embedded "in the foundation of the city wall of Uruk for all to read" (11). In other words, Gilgamesh's heroic exploits are both historically and literally steeped in the foundation of Uruk. Similarly, Rama in *The Ramayana* exemplifies the foundational beliefs and ideal character for a dharma-aware Hindu. Rama's biographical struggle for blissful dharmic living also encompasses, celebrates, and promotes the world-view of ancient Hindu philosophy. By founding the great Roman empire, Virgil's Aeneas is also a national father figure; (however, Aeneas is more of a reluctant hero, but more on that later). So, Wallace is a founding father figure like other ancient epic heroes; but, the difference is that because it is filmed as a realistic historical biography and because it does not articulate the ancient view of divine power, Wallace is not the offspring of a god.

Hence, Wallace's father is not a god as de Vries insists the hero's lineage must be, but Wallace does still have a cosmic psychological connection. Unlike Gilgamesh who is, according to Mack et al. in *Norton Anthology*, "more god than man," Wallace is purely mortal (11). Nonetheless, Wallace's own father is a significant local hero, which in the realm of realistic films is as divine as one can be. And more importantly, Wallace has a cosmic psychological connection. For instance, as in *Gilgamesh*, dreams figure prominently in *Braveheart*. In *Gilgamesh*, dreams link the hero with prophecy; for instance, Gilgamesh dreams of Enkidu's arrival and his battle with the bull before it occurs. Similarly, Wallace dreams with cosmic foresight; in addition, his dreams also connect him with the dead. For instance, Wallace initially dreams of his dead father, Malcolm, speaking to him. Malcolm offers some advice, by saying: "Your heart's free. Have the

courage to follow it." This initial dream sets up William's journey to become a national hero. So, even though they are under imperial rule, the Scots are free in their hearts. And it is their hearts that will guide them to freedom. Hence, this dream is simultaneously a cosmic link with the future and with the past. It is a prophecy in the sense that William Wallace will lead his people to independence by the will of his defiance to oppression and his unfailing allegiance to freedom. It is also a link to the past in the sense that a fallen loved one is communicating advice and cosmic support. This indicates that the dead are watching and guiding Wallace, much like the deities do in Homer. For instance, later Wallace dreams of his wife and says he wants to stay with her in peace. Again, this is a prophecy in a sense that it alludes to the notion that Wallace and his wife will be together when he dies. In addition, it gives Wallace the encouragement to face a torturous death. Before Wallace is captured, he even admits that he believes his wife is watching him and that he honours her memory by fighting for freedom. So, like Gilgamesh, Rama, and Aeneas, William Wallace is a founding father figure who fights passionately for his nation's freedom. In addition, despite the absence of divine lineage or the intervention of Homeric gods, Wallace is linked to transcendent cosmic forces psychologically in his dreams. Further, fighting for a nation requires an ideal standard, and Wallace is just such a national representative; however, since *Braveheart* is a popular modern film, Gibson's Wallace is also an ideal representative of our cultural values today.

On the one hand, Wallace is an ideal Scottish hero, representing a fearless historical figure who united Scottish Klans and inspired a brief taste of independence. More importantly, due to its "universally appealing" core of "emotional truth," Gibson's Wallace speaks not only to patriotic Scots, but also to

a diverse cultural audience. By "universally appealing" and "emotional truth," it is meant that the film engages audiences by effectively drawing on the fairly basic human feelings of love, loss, courage, and honour. Of course, it would be foolish to assume that everyone everywhere feels the same way about a film, but in this analysis one must address the ability of a film to appeal to a diverse popular audience. Epic literature has stood the test of time and thus is often said to be "universally appealing." However, *Braveheart* is a recent film and so its durability is unknown; nonetheless, *Braveheart* is "universally appealing" in the sense that has been both a box-office and a critical success. So, by appealing to a mass audience, like epic literature, *Braveheart* is also "universal." The reason ancient epic literature is often considered universal stems from its ability to continue connecting with readers. In the case of *Braveheart*, popular values are exemplified in Gibson's characterization of Wallace and in terms of the "emotional truth" expressed by the film.

Centrally, the "emotional truth" that has stood the span of humanity and touches the core of popular understanding is the communication of the feeling that a broken heart is a brave heart. That is, a heart that has been ravaged by loss often becomes fearless (having nothing else to lose) and thus can risk death and in the process become an honourable hero. Using de Vries's heroic life pattern, like Achilles, Gilgamesh, and Rama, Wallace is forced into emotionally intense heroic action because of a tragic personal loss. Applying Campbell's notion of a "call to adventure" from the heroic cycle in *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, and like Achilles, Gilgamesh, and Rama, Wallace is called to action when he suffers a great personal loss (49-55). In *The Iliad*, Achilles is emotionally overwhelmed by the death of his dearest friend Patrocles, causing Achilles to fight passionately, leading

the Greeks to victory. Earlier, Achilles refused to fight since his honour was insulted; however, such a personal loss over-rides all of his social and political rationalizations against fighting. The death of Patrocles brings the passionate hero within Achilles to life, enabling him to attain the status of an epic hero. In a similar manner, the death of Enkidu wounds Gilgamesh so deeply that the most passionate part of his journey is forced to begin. That is, Gilgamesh's pain causes him to embark on more than just another heroic adventure; he is on a journey to end his fear and hatred of death -- he is on a journey of epic scope. Rama as well, in *The Ramayana*, is finally thrust into heroic combative action when Sita, his love, is kidnapped by Ravana. In each of these cases, the investment of personal pain draws the heroic story into more universally appealing dimensions. As Merchant explains in *Epic*, the "underlying conception characteristic of epic" is that "it must be large in scale." That is, it must have epic proportions; hence, life, death, pain, revenge, and love are timeless themes, imbuing what would otherwise be a simple series of adventure with an epic passion. In other words, agonizing loss imbues stock heroicism with personality and passion. Likewise, the execution of his wife painfully thrusts Wallace into action. Like Achilles, Wallace fight passionately, displaying his fearless prowess in the heat of battle. Hence, as Homer focuses his writing, Gibson focuses his direction on the emotional aspect of battle; in this case, Gibson uses carefully edited close-ups to capture the warriors' expressions of ferocity, fear, and confusion. In addition, Gibson uses graceful slow motion pacing to accent particularly emotional sequences. This draws the audience in to savour the emotional intensity and thus become further engrossed in the characters and their narrative. So, fundamentally, Wallace is a universally appealing popular epic hero in the sense that he communicates the emotional truth of being forced

into action by deep loss. Having lost all that mattered to him, Wallace overcomes his limbo (of false peace between his youth and his first battle with the English). For a period in the early part of the film, Wallace is married and yearns to live in peace with his wife and to raise a family. His ideal aspirations are overshadowed by injustice and oppression. Hence, Wallace is forced into action by the loss of his love, imbuing his epic journey (for justice and freedom) with a deeply personal motivation, passion.

In addition to such common epic passion, Wallace displays an intellect and loving desire like Odysseus; further, in his martyrdom, Wallace demonstrates a self-control like Rama. Along with physical prowess, Wallace is an intellectual leader. As mentioned earlier, he is a man trained both in body and mind, using his wits to overcome challenges on his heroic journey. For instance, when Wallace first arrives back to his village, he is tested in a stone throwing contest. In the challenge, Hamish, a larger man heaves a huge stone in an effort to strike Wallace -- but the stone misses. Then Wallace, with a trace of "David and Goliath," throws a pebble and knocks his adversary down. In this incident, Wallace acts like the folkloric Robin Hood defeating Little John in order to become the leader of the rebel fighters. Like Robin Hood, the band of rebels now have a leader who is not only strong, but also smart. On the whole though, like the archetypal "David and Goliath" narrative, Wallace is an underdog relying on his wits against the mighty British. For instance, Wallace employs a spearing war tactic from the ancient Greeks to defeat an otherwise unstoppable cavalry charge. In that key scene, he asks he's men to hold their ground until the enemy horses come extremely close; then, he orders his soldiers to raise their spears, killing the enemy horses and enemy soldiers. In this sense then, Wallace uses intellect to overcome the giant

British threat, much like Odysseus does. For instance, Odysseus frees his men from the Cyclopes by making the monster drunk and then spearing his eye when asleep. The monster awakes and shouts out "Nobody" to name his attacker, thus solidifying Odysseus's ability to forge and implement smart strategies. Hence, the Cyclopes is defeated by Odysseus's intellect. Also, like Odysseus, Wallace yearns to reunite with his wife. In his years of wandering, Odysseus sustains his effort to go back home with the desire of reuniting with his wife. As Mack et al. say in *Norton Anthology*, Odysseus is offered immortality by Calypso, to live "a life of ease and tranquility, like that of the gods" (98). However, Odysseus refuses this, remaining loyal to his love for his land, his family, and his wife. In the case of *Braveheart*, Princess Isabelle sympathizes with Wallace and begs him to confess that he is a traitor to the British crown and thus save his life. Isabelle says Wallace will be able to live safely in a tower, and alludes to his potential freedom when the oppressive King Edward is dead and she herself will have more power. Wallace refuses on account of honour. As with most epic heroes, honour is central to a hero's identity. Achilles would not fight when his honour was insulted and Rama willingly left his kingdom because it was the most honourable way to act. Rama honoured the wishes of his father and the forces of dharma and went off to suffer for years. For an epic warrior, life without honour is a fate worse than death. Hence, Wallace explains to Princess Isabelle that he must not confess anything he does not believe in. And like Odysseus again, here Wallace demonstrates his necessity for mental prowess. Isabelle gives Wallace a potion so he will not feel the pain of torture; he honours her concern by drinking it, but then he spits it out when she leaves in order to maintain a clear mind and in order to remain honourable to his allegiance to higher values. So, Wallace is like Odysseus in the

sense that both are men of wits and both long to reunite with their wives and live peaceably; finally, like any epic hero, Wallace is a steadfast man of honour.

To illustrate, Wallace faces torture and a youthful death with the self-control of Rama. Over the course of Book two of *The Ramayana* especially, Rama exemplifies dharmic self-control in the most trivial and the most significant ways. For instance, with trivial matters, as Valmiki indicates in *Norton Anthology*, "Even if he were to be harshly addressed, he would not answer back" (581). So, Rama functions with self-control in his everyday action. More importantly, in the face of exile, Rama accepts his fate in order to honour his father and in order to remain faithful to dharma. Mack et al. explains that dharma is one's sacred duty to honour "one's place in the cosmic scheme of things" (570). Honouring dharma enables one to achieve the release from karmic rebirth by achieving moksha. Wallace is not a Hindu, like Rama, but there are significant parallels in term of self-control, honour, and release. When Wallace is brutally tortured, he maintains a meditative self-control; he sustains the pain with the power of not only his mind, but also with his soul. Wallace's transcendent link motivates him to endure the suffering of torture with honour and a clear mind. In the physical world, Wallace gains nothing by being tortured; he will simply end up a dismembered carcass. However, it is his unwavering belief in freedom that enables his capability to accept and endure physical torture. Like Rama, Wallace's goal transcends immediate physical, social, or political motivation. Wallace is dying for what he believes. Hence, when lying on the torture table Wallace triumphantly yelling "Freedom!" does two things. He is yelling freedom to inspire faith and honour in the spectators with the film narrative and within the audience itself. In addition, Wallace yells freedom to proclaim his own achievement of cosmic transcendence.

Wallace has lived an honourable life, true to his heart and with fearless conviction; so, he will finally be reunited with his wife and they will live happily. In a sense, like moksha and the karmic cycle, Wallace has been released from the heroic cycle and thus his narrative is complete.

Essentially then, the film itself will keep the Wallace legend alive; in addition, the values of strength, intellect, love, honour, and martyrdom are celebrated. Since this is a popular film, though, *Braveheart* functions as more than just an epic historical and biographical film; it is also a Mel Gibson movie. Mel Gibson is a film superstar who has largely made a career out of playing the hero; in a similar way, Harrison Ford has also made a career out of playing the everlasting popular hero. In Ford's case, his entire body of action films must be seen as a series of adventures by the same heroic persona. Gibson, Eastwood, and others fit the notion of an everlasting heroic persona as well; however, they have also made their mark as directors and producers of other projects. So, unlike many other actor, Ford has continually and successfully grounded his entire career by playing the enduring reluctant hero. William Wallace in *Braveheart* echoes ancient epics by being a founding father figure, having a cosmic psychological connection (to prophecy and dead loved ones), and by demonstrating that a broken heart is a brave heart. Essentially, Wallace's heroicism states that intellect and self-control enables one to die honourably in order to fight for the value of having freedom and justice for all. In comparison, Harrison Ford also fights for freedom and justice, but never dies. In his series of filmic adventures Ford acts as a perennial restorative founding father figure; calming the desire for rebellion with the value of social responsibility, Ford ritualistically proves that even though our hearts can be broken, an honourable heart is everlasting.

As exemplified by *Air Force One*, each Harrison Ford action film is another adventure for the same handsome, athletic, intellectual, and down-to-earth hero. Like *The Odyssey*, Ford's action films are a series of adventures for an intellectual hero on one long journey home; yet in Ford's case, "home" is the climactic restoration of justice at the end of each film. In other words, Ford is not a founding father/martyr hero in Wallace's sense; rather, Ford is an everlasting restorative founding father figure. Nonetheless, like Achilles with Patrocles and Wallace with his wife, Ford is typically faced with some heart-breaking tragedy before being forced into action. In Ford's case though, the tragedy is not only a personal one, but also a social one, because the institutions of justice fail the individual, and so the individual must act to restore order. Metaphorically linked to Odysseus destroying all of the suitors in his home, Ford kicks all the corruption and criminal elements out of his "home" (America), and thus restores justice and freedom. For instance, in *Air Force One*, Ford plays the American president as a family man who is forced to be the hero. His plane is high-jacked and his family are being held hostage. Symbolically, being the president, Ford's family is America, and so America is being held hostage. Like Wallace fighting for the freedom of his nation, Ford is symbolically fighting for the freedom of America. Specifically, America is held hostage by Russian extremists and by a corrupt American security official. It is significant to note that corruption within Ford's "home" (America) is often a central culprit; in other words, Ford is continually cleaning America of its own corruption. In this case, the corrupt security official and the high-jackers are motivated primarily by greed and a dishonourable desire for power. Their desire is dishonourable because it consists of backstabbing, bribes, and terrorism. In the end, Ford saves his family and the Air Force One

plane is blown to pieces. Symbolically, a corrupt America has been completely destroyed and so the film ends with president Harrison Ford in a new plane. This new plane represents a new America, where there are no traitors and where justice and freedom reign. Within the film, government officials are depicted as potentially corrupt, when shown attempting to take over Ford's power as the president. The government officials did not succeed, but their existence alludes to the everlasting nature of Ford's heroic legacy. That is, there is always a potential for corruption and in his next film, Ford most likely must cleanse America of such malignancy once again. So, in *Air Force One* Ford proves that by acting freely and honourably, oppression is overcome, justice is served, and America is cleansed once again.

Fundamentally, Han Solo of the epic film series *Star Wars* established Ford's persona of a restorative founding father hero who is simultaneously a rebel and a patriot. Literally, Solo was the rebel of the rebels; that is, he was a rebellious character amongst the "rebel" movement. Automatically, this endears Ford to the audience in two basic ways. One, an accentuated rebel status distinguishes Ford from all the other characters. Two, his rebellious nature is appealing, because most people like to celebrate their own uniqueness -- their own difference from everyone else. So, Ford's heroic persona embodies the audience member's dual existence as a unique individual and as a social being. As a rebel's rebel, Solo went through life on his own terms. He began in the *Star Wars* epic as a mercenary for hire with a self-serving attitude, yet he always came through for the entire group when needed. Further, from beginning as a mercenary with no allegiance to any group, Ford ends up in the third film as a restorative founding father figure (at Princess Leia's side) for the formation of a new rebel society. In

other words, Han Solo moves from rebel outsider to a restorative founding father. In this way, Ford embodies a unique American notion of heroic identity; that is, Ford is an ideal hero by being both a rebel underdog and a status quo nationalist. In other words, Ford is ritually enacting the master narrative of the American Revolution.

Hence, in the beginning of Ford's action films, chaos disrupts everyday life, in the middle Ford fights for personal and simultaneously societal reasons, and in the end, the everyman's personal and social spheres are brought to order. This narrative structure has two basic effects. One, it celebrates the ability of the underdog to make a difference and two, it celebrates the values of freedom and justice. To illustrate Ford's everyman rebel functioning to restore the personal and social order, consider *The Fugitive*. Interestingly, Ford's everyman character is like the historical Wallace, since both are athletic intellectual underdogs and reluctant heroes. Wallace at first wants a life of peace, but is forced to take action; in the same way, Ford continually plays a character who wants to lead a normal life, but is forced to fight for justice. For instance, in *The Fugitive*, Ford's wife is killed and he is convicted for her murder. Since no one believes his innocence and since no one will stand up for justice, Ford must act. Essentially then, Ford is an average individual caught in extraordinary circumstances; Ford is a reluctant hero who must rebel against the judicial and police systems in order to fight for his freedom and restore society's capacity for justice. Ford succeeds, the real culprits are caught, and justice is restored. In this case, the representative of society, the hero-chasing detective played by Tommy Lee Jones continually insists that he is only doing his job. So, even though the detective is the antagonist because he hunts Ford, the real criminals are individuals with corrupt business power -- not

the American police detective. In this way, *The Fugitive* exemplifies the way Ford's films serve to be both criticisms of America and celebrations of America. Here specifically, big business and the pharmaceutical industry is punished for being unethical and trying to sell Americans a dangerous drug simply to make profit. Ford represents the ethical doctor who has been framed by the corrupt system and must clear his name and the medical industry. So, like Odysseus cleansing his home of dishonourable suitors, Ford cleanses his "home" by kicking out the corrupt profit-motivated individuals. All the while, Ford proves that the average individual can still make a difference and be the hero. By being an everyman and a rebel, Ford reassures audiences that they have the freedom to act in sync with social values. And by restoring order by the end of each, Ford ritually demonstrates the invincible power of good. So, like Ford's rebel patriot persona, the narrative itself has the best of both sides by being able to criticize certain aspects of society while reassuring us that once such corruption is defeated, America is great once again. Hence, Ford's status as an epic hero is attained by his continual adventures as the everyman reluctant hero of popular culture. Like *The Odyssey*, each film is another adventure in an epic corpus; however, Ford's "home" is reached at the end of each film when the corrupt elements of society are eliminated and an ethical America is restored.

Most importantly, Ford's reluctant hero echoes Virgil's Aeneas, and in turn, Ford's persona reflects us. Aeneas is the quintessential reluctant hero, torn between social duty and personal desire, and thus embodying the contradiction of his times. Further, as Mack et al. say in *Norton Anthology*, Aeneas strives not necessarily for glory in his own lifetime, but "for the future" (637). Similarly, as a rebel hero, Ford acts both for the individual and the community; however, Ford is

never selfishly motivated, so his individual desires are always in sync with what is best for the whole of society. As for a hero aiming for the future glory of a better America, Ford is never celebrated by the narrative itself. That is, unlike even William Wallace, Ford does not hear his legend grow before him. This is because Ford does not intend to be a national hero; rather, Ford is not a hero by intent. So, the end of Ford's films aim overtly for the glorious future of a cleansed America, not for Ford's own legendary status. Further, Ford is too humble to acknowledge his own heroic status; in other words, he acts for the good of his country, his family, or for an ethical virtue -- never solely for himself. Thus, like Aeneas, Ford's glory is in the future possibility of a better, more ethical, society. Unlike Aeneas, though, Ford's personal desire is in sync with social demands. Being celebrations of hope, like the "happily ever after" close of most fairy tales, Ford's films close with such future-looking optimism. If read as isolated texts, any one of Ford's action films end with this fairy tale quality; however, the difference is that the audience knows that this is "happily ever after . . . for now." And it is such a difference that sustains Ford's status as a modern legendary hero; that is, audiences identify with rebellious desires and celebrate a restored social order until the next adventure. Further, as Merchant says in *Epic*, Aeneas is both isolated from and representative of, his civilization (24). In a general way, Ford's persona is also isolated from, and representative of, the social psyche of the audience. In this urban media age, community is largely determined by media technology. Basically, we do not live community-centered lives; rather, our community is a popular one, dictated largely by communications technology. Consequently, we exist as isolated individuals in the sense that most of us live in large urban centers and may not know our neighbours. However, we are still intimate members of the

media community; we know and are avid participants in popular culture. Hence, like Aeneas and Ford, we are isolated from yet also representative of our culture; specifically, we are isolated on a local level, but participants on a popular level. Ford's rebel hero role helps speaks to the individual viewer's sense of difference and thus smooths over collective difference. That is, if everyone feels different collectively, then this sense of being different unifies a culturally diverse audience. In essence, the value of individualism unites the collective viewing audience.

Like Wallace and other epic heroes, Ford's universal appeal and emotional truth stems from his broken heart that becomes a brave heart; however, Ford's ritual cleansing demonstrates that an honourable heart is an everlasting heart. As a recurring motif in heroic narratives, when Ford's heart is broken, he is set into fearless action. However, as we have seen, the difference with Ford is that his heart breaks not only because of personal loss, but also because of the loss or corruption of a social ideal, such as justice or freedom. Hence, in *Air Force One*, Ford's heart is broken not only because his family is taken hostage, but also because corruption has allowed criminals into his "home." Similarly, in The *Fugitive*, Ford's heart is shattered not only because his wife is killed, but simultaneously because the justice system and corrupt business people have failed America. So, Ford's call to action is imbued with personal motivation on the narrative level, but also patriotic motivation on the symbolic level. Like Wallace, Ford is an iconic individual guided by honour and heart. Ford's heroism stems from a love of the values that Americans and popular audiences hold dear, such as individualism, freedom, and justice. Parallel to Wallace, Ford is an ideal cultural combination of a strong body, mind, and soul. And like other heroes, Ford's passionate soul enables him to overcome pain and restore justice and freedom with

a fearless sense of honour. Ford never sells out; rather, Ford always fights faithfully for freedom and justice. Mack et al. in *Norton Anthology*, say that Odysseus is "a man dedicated to life, accepting its limitations and making full use of its possibilities, a man who is destined to endure to the end and be saved" (99). In modern terms, the ideal of Odysseus is embodied in Harrison Ford; Ford is a mature, intelligent hero who longs for, fights for, and symbolically achieves peace. As Odysseus finds peace by reaching home, Ford finds peace by the time he reaches the end of the film. Hence, the reluctant rebel everyman of Ford ritualistically cleanses America of its negative elements in order to make America "the home of the brave" once again -- and again and again. Hence, just as Odysseus's resilience enables him to endure, Ford symbolically proves that with an honourable heart, freedom and justice are everlasting. Very simply, Ford is an ideal American and popular everyman who, for a peaceful and incorrupt America, can always throws a solid punch.

In popular culture, the hero who has thrown the greatest punches is Muhammad Ali. Ali exemplifies the modern media's version of the heroic narrative cycle within reality. Essentially, Ali embodies both the passionate martyrdom of Wallace and the intelligently enduring honour of Ford. In general, like Wallace, Ford, and other epic heroes, Ali is a founding father figure (of the Civil Rights Movement). In addition, Ali's life corresponds to de Vries's heroic cycle, creating a complicated warrior-poet persona. And most importantly, Ali's greatest inspirational power as a hero also stems from his heart; his heart has been broken by politics, age, and disease, but Ali remains brave. Like Wallace, Ali is a martyr, honourably standing up and suffering for his beliefs. And like Ford, Ali is a survivor, proving that freedom, justice, and real heroes still exist. As Merchant

states in *Epic*, for the great hero "the events of his own lifetime have already become subjects for epic" (2). In our popular culture, there are no epic poets, so our heroic narratives are constructed by the media; in particular, television is an ideal medium for epic myth-making akin to oral epic poetry. According to Marshall McLuhan, television is a cool medium which allows for greater audience participation. McLuhan goes so far as to say that television itself is much like ancient oral literature, in the sense that it requires more interplay between the medium and the audience (308-337). As McLuhan says, television "is above all a medium that demands a creatively participant response" (336). Like the highly involved nature of oral epic poetic recitation, then, television demands high viewer participation; images hit us with such casual ease that we cannot help but feel close to television reality. Specifically, Ali has been a consistent media force who has endeared us and thus has become a media narrative epic hero. One television program in particular, *A & E's Biography*, circulates daily narratives on different popular culture figures, aiming to make legends out of certain stars. Naturally, Ali's life works well as an epic heroic narrative, and the following section refers to A & E's biographical version of Ali.

Like Wallace and Ford, Ali is also a founding father figure. Ali became the most globally recognized force of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, representing racial, religious, and political difference. On the racial level, Ali was television's first outspoken black hero. In a time when African-Americans were struggling to achieve integration, equal rights, and pride, Ali boastfully paraded as a strong, handsome, and charismatic person. Religiously, when Cassius Clay became a black Muslim, Ali became a pivotal figure in promoting religious freedom. And it was such racial pride and religious difference that fueled Ali's

political defiance, pulling him from athletic hero to national hero. To understand Ali's development as a Civil Rights founding father figure, as a new America's founding father figure, Ali's media life must be analyzed in terms of the "American Dream" narrative, de Vries's heroic cycle, the warrior-poet persona, and the power of a sacrificial and courageous heart.

The begetting and the birth of Ali in our media narrative stems from the "American Dream" narrative and his Olympic days. Ali's "American Dream" story begins with the upbringing of a poor young black kid named Cassius Clay. One day, his bike, parked in front of a local gym, is stolen. Full of anger, Clay storms into the gym looking for a policeman and ready to whip the culprit. The gym trainer also happened to be police chief Joe Martin. Like a fairy godfather, Martin soon seriously begins training the naturally talented Clay. (Interestingly, the name Clay connects with the ancient notion of moulding.) Clay's hard work pays off, and he earns a gold medal at the Rome, Olympics. (Also interesting is Rome's connection with ancient heroes.) Anyway, up to this point, Clay's story is an "American Dream" narrative. A poor young kid from the streets has suffered hardship (low income family and bike is stolen), stumbles upon an opportunity (to be trained as a boxer) and through hard work achieves success (as Olympic hero). Hence, our media hero is born not through deity, but through the "American Dream." Clay is not the offspring of a supernatural force, but of the American narrative of equality, hard work, and success. In this way then, Clay establishes himself as an ideal American, for he illustrates the master-narrative of the "American Dream."

From his Olympic glory, Ali then proceeds to become an epic hero by uncannily fulfilling several elements of de Vries's heroic cycle. As just mentioned,

the begetting and birth of our hero is nationally significant, because Ali is born through the "American Dream." Next, the way in which our hero is brought up "reveals his strength, courage, or other particular features at a very early age" (214). In *Biography*, Ali's mother mentions that Ali begins talking before the age of one, and that he always was a great talker. And later in life, what Ali has to say figures prominently in his development as a hero. In addition though, de Vries in *Heroic Song*, says that the child hero "is often very slow in his development: he is dumb or pretends to be mentally deficient" (214). Similarly, Ali also was not very good in school, and even failed his army draft exam -- (which figures importantly in his future). Further, de Vries points out that the hero wins a maiden after overcoming danger. In this sense, Clay comes back from Rome an Olympic hero, and wins America's love. In addition, Clay displays an ultra-confidence in his own prowess, akin to the pride of Achilles or Odysseus. For instance, unlike any other boxer, Clay punched while moving backwards. As Jose Torres elaborates in *Biography*, Clay fought with his hands down so his opponent could take an easy punch, and Clay could prove that he was the fastest. Like epic heroes then, Clay entered into battle with a fearless confidence, openly inviting attacks so he could prove his prowess. Such an attitude echoes Virgil's Book V of *The Aeneid*, when one confident boxer challenges anyone to a fight on sheer self-confidence. And like Achilles, honourable fame was Clay's prime motivation. Ali states in *Biography* that as a child that he wanted to be world champion because there was "so much glory, it sounded so good." Ali would dream of having his name written on marquees and basking in the glory of being world champion. With such self-confidence and growing glory, Harry Belafonte on *Biography* even says that Clay "looked like a god who was just this wild thing who was delivered to earth." Like

Enkidu in *Gilgamesh*, Clay was a magnificent hero delivered to the American masses, and blacks especially, to inspire hope and confirm the ability to achieve. However, winning fights with glorious prowess was only part of Ali's task; Ali also had to become his own epic poet, in order to ensure the race-sensitive mass media would recognize him. Hence, Ali became his own bard. However, like Odysseus, the young Clay was boastful and so many did not believe in his prowess and were waiting for him to fall.

Clay's major heroic test was against the monster Sonny Liston. According to *Biography*, no one in 1964 believed Clay would defeat Liston. Up until that point, Liston annihilated every opponent. Clay became upset at the lack of support until Malcolm X spoke with him. Like Wallace receiving inspirational advice from his dead father, or like Gilgamesh being reassured by his dreams, Clay became inspired by the spiritual guidance of Malcolm X. Malcolm told Clay that "All he had to do was put his mind to it and surely if God has seen fit for David to be successful over Goliath, that he would be successful over Liston. All he had to do was believe." Here, as with Wallace and Ford, the David and Goliath narrative applies in terms of situating the hero as the witty underdog. As it says in *Biography*, Clay's defeat of Liston to become world champion was a rite of passage that "shook up the world." The next day, however, would be Clay's acquisition of vulnerability, for he announces his conversion to Islam and changes his name to Muhammad Ali. As de Vries says in *Heroic Song*, Achilles could only be wounded in the heel and Krishna in the sole of his foot (215). In Ali's case, he could only be wounded in terms of his religious stance, the soul of his beliefs.

Despite his conversion and mixed public reaction, Ali's wrathful legend continues to grow. For instance, Floyd Patterson wanted to bring the

championship back to America. Insulted, even though Ali could have knocked Patterson out, according to *Biography*, Ali punishes Patterson for a full twelve rounds until the fight is finally stopped. Echoing Achilles dragging Hektor's body around in circles, Ali humiliated Patterson. Or consider the way Ali, in a stupor of passionate rage like Achilles, Wallace, or Ford, defeats Ernie Terrell. As in *Biography*, Christian Ernie Terrell refuses to refer to Clay as Ali, and in a legendary spectacle of wrath, Ali pounds on Terrell while dramatically shouting, "Call me Muhammad Ali, not Cassius Clay! What's my name?" And in 1966, Ali had what many in *Biography* consider to be his greatest fight. Against Cleveland Williams, Ali made no mistakes, fighting the perfect fight. This is the peak of Ali's status as an athletic legend. Ali up to this point in his career is a Homeric warrior hero. For instance, Achilles is a man of extremes whose anger fuels his heroism. Achilles requires immediate gratification through respect, spoils, and blood. Similarly, Ali fought for glory, demanded respect, flaunted his wealth, and battled mercilessly. Like Achilles, when Ali fought Ernie Terrell, Ali was consumed with anger and a thirst for personal revenge because his honour and his beliefs had been insulted.

In an eerie echo of de Vries's heroic cycle, Ali is banished from his land, the boxing ring, and then comes back into his land to rule once again. The lowering of the Army Draft test score requirement causes Ali to be called to fight in Vietnam. Refusing to fight, Ali was vilified by the media, stripped of his championship, and his best fighting years were stolen from him. Like Rama banished into the jungle, Ali accepted his fate because of his beliefs. This banishment moves Ali from an athletic and Achilles-like hero to a martyr-like hero, such as Wallace or Rama. In essence, like any epic hero, Ali achieves greatness and suffers greatly because of

his own unrelenting code of honour. America's son became America's outcast for a number of years, however, by being out of the ring, Ali was able to concentrate on being his own bard. Ali spread his narrative and his beliefs around University and College campuses and like Aeneas coming back from the Underworld, Ali comes back with renewed vigor. Due to his wit and charisma, Ali became a powerful speaker, becoming a warrior-poet persona. In this case, Ali displayed grace and beauty in the ring and in his speech; his warrior-poet status imbued himself with integrity. In other words, Ali stood by what he believed; he was no longer a boastful trickster, but a voice for the racial, religious, and political freedom. Further, Ali transforms from a martyr to a founding father figure. By suffering for his beliefs, Ali became a martyr; however, by continuing to voice his defiance and thus gain support from the people, Ali became the founding father figure for a new America. Like Ford, Ali was fighting for a peaceful, incorrupt, and honourable America. By 1970, the temperament of America changed, and agreeing with Ali, Americans stood behind Ali once again. As it uncannily says in de Vries' *Heroic Song*, "When the hero is banished in his youth he returns later and is victorious over his enemies" (216). Like Rama exiled to the jungle, Ali fights his way out of the jungle to follow the "American Dream" and win the hearts of millions. Just as Liston was the unbeatable monster, so was George Foreman. However, going back to Africa to have "The Rumble in the Jungle," Ali does it once again. He returns to his land to rule once again. As is mentioned in *Biography*, Ali intimidated Foreman by saying, "I am your master. You were a child when I was champion and I have come back to reclaim my throne." Symbolically even, Ali's rope-a-dope style represents the nature of his heroic spirit. Essentially, Ali suffers blow after blow until his opponent tires down and then Ali

knocks his opponent out. Over the years of his banishment, Ali was criticized and attacked by the powerful American government, but Ali stood his ground and did not break. Ali survived punishment symbolically and literally in the Foreman fight, and pulled himself out of the jungle of banishment in fairy tale fashion to reclaim his glory. As it says in *Biography*, "the circle was complete. He'd won it all back." And so, Ali was America's hero once again, proving that the "American Dream" is still attainable, and all the while winning the love of the fans, his maiden, once again.

The rest of Ali's boxing career only adds to his legend, but it is his life outside of the ring now that solidifies both his martyr-hero and surviving-hero status. Ali went on to lose and win the championship a third time. He eventually fades, like most boxers do, into old age. Had Ali not become afflicted with Parkinson's disease, he may have faded completely, overshadowed by new sports heroes. Since developing Parkinson's disease though, Ali's iconic status as hero has risen beyond sports and politics to signify the capacity of the human spirit to survive. The universal appeal and emotional truth of Ali stem not only from the fact that his broken heart became brave, or that his honourable heart endured, but also from the fact that Ali is all heart. As de Vries says in *Heroic Song*, the hero sometimes have to leave the realm again, after winning it with such difficulty. Similarly, age and disease forced Ali to live the realm of the ring with epic heroic style. Ali's honour and integrity stems from his banishment days; like Wallace and Rama, Ali displayed a self-control that enabled him to sacrifice all his material glory for his beliefs. In this sense, Ali is a great martyr of our times. His martyrdom also made him a founding father figure for a new America, an America after Vietnam and after the Civil Rights Movement. Ali's surviving power stems

from his resilient ability to achieve the "American Dream" once again; like Ford and Odysseus, Ali displayed an intelligence and willpower that enabled him to finally achieve his fantasy of glory. Ali's unique contribution to modern heroism stems from his ability to survive against all odds; in a society where youth and health are supreme, even the old and sick Ali defies our cultural stereotypes. Having endured poverty, political banishment, and age, Parkinson's disease is another obstacle he must contend with. Hence, age and disease only makes him more brave; culturally then, Ali has become a symbol of hope, honour, and survival. In the Atlanta Olympics, as a testament to his heroic status, Ali lit the torch and rekindled the hearts of millions; hence, like epic heroes, his legend will live on. Now though he does not have to be his own bard, because his heroic life speaks for itself. Gene Kilroy in *Biography* explained it well by saying, Ali "won the title with his fists, but he won the world with his heart. He's truly the people's champion." Ali represents us, the world we have become, and the ideal we should strive for. In other words, if Ali taught us about racial, religious, and political freedom in the sixties, and inspired us in the seventies, then his greatest legacy today is proving the human spirit outshines age and sickness.

So, as is apparent, the epic bard continues to echo in our popular culture. *Braveheart's* William Wallace echoes ancient epics by being a founding father figure, having a supernatural psychological connection (to prophecy and dead loved ones), and by illustrating that a broken heart is a brave heart. With self-control, Wallace sacrifices his own life so that the values of freedom and justice will live on untainted. Harrison Ford is a perennial restorative founding father figure, proves individual desire and social responsibility can coexist, and ritualistically cleanses America of corruption. Ford proves that even though our

hearts can be broken, an honourable heart is forever victorious and thus never dies. Muhammad Ali is a founding father figure striving for an America where race, religion, politics, age, and disease are overlooked and the human spirit is celebrated. With a sacrificial and unstoppable spirit, Ali proves that although at times our hearts can be broken, brave, honourable, and victorious, we must strive to always live with our hearts. And if we do, our glory will be true and everlasting, reverberating through the ages and beyond.

## APPENDIX 2: The Hero System Chart

For the sake of clarity, the media-identity industry can be explained through the Hero System chart. This is a simple classification system within which the inter-relationship of cultural heroes, legends, and icons can be understood. All of the chart's categories are overlapping; however, certain types of figures would largely be considered part of one particular segment. Over time, an individual's place on the chart can change, dependent upon how a culture sees that individual and his or her story.

For example, in his day, Lincoln would be in the third and lowest section, situated as a significant contemporary political figure. Over time, with repeated stories of his achievements and death, he may move his way up, into the second section. Hence, the cultural fictionalization process begins. This, of course, is not to say Lincoln's story becomes a fiction; rather, his life is filtered through the hero cycle and thus he is established at the highest level, as a historical hero. He was an actual person, but his popular biography is a selective one. Another example is Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's ideal status as a founding figure was recently questioned in the late-1990s because of his ownership of slaves. Further, America's historically racial divide was blurred with the acknowledgement of Jefferson's darker offspring. Hence, for a moment, his position dropped to the first intermediary level, where his story was reevaluated. In this more oral space, Jefferson's story was negotiated and updated on television news programs and talk shows, such as *Oprah*. Hence, Jefferson's story is modified to better suit the facts and our times. It remains to be seen however, whether America's shame of slavery and America's secret of inter-racial lineage makes a lasting effect on the American psyche. The mass media presence of potential contemporary icons, such as Tiger

Woods in golf and the Rock in wrestling demonstrate that new hero-stories may emerge, ones that define national identity more on skill and less on race. Potentially, such hero-stories may have a homogenizing effect, much like Lincoln's story. However, Woods and the Rock are not serious national figures, because their achievements are in sports and entertainment and so it seems unlikely that they will rise any further. Muhammad Ali, on the other hand, may rise up the hero system ranks, because his significance transcends the sports and media arena. Further, since being afflicted with Parkinson's disease is quite tragic, he may even be hovering around the first intermediary category today, proving that he is a true living legend. Nonetheless, Lincoln's status, the Jefferson reevaluation, and the celebrity of Woods and the Rock indicate an active American identity industry, one that is continually in the process of identity meaning-making.

Hence, the following is an organized chart of three general and two intermediary areas of popular entertainment which circulate, formulate, and promote hero stories. Whereas America has a strong identity industry, with several figures in each category, Canada tends to have more in the lower categories than the higher categories.

**The Hero System Chart**

**Revered Non-Fictional Story: An established story that is representative of a society's history and national identity. These are biographies filtered through the heroic monomyth.**

I. The Historical/Cultural Hero

Here, the hero is usually a Founding Father/Mother Figure and/or Martyr with a historically-based biography; they are significant to the national identity of their people. They may be controversial and debated, but usually the debate and controversy concern whether they deserve such an elevated status or not. Examples include Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln in America. William Wallace in Scotland and Joan of Arc in France.

*Non-Fictional/Fictional Space*

*In Between Category -- Legends and Folklore*

*This section includes those historical figures who may or may not have been real. However, for varying reasons, over time, they have attained a semi-historical status in the popular mind, coming to represent a fictionalized version of the past. In the case of contemporary icons, they seem to symbolize a sense of tragic national character or a failure of the American dream. So, they have the tragedy of the martyr, but the life of a financially successful celebrity. Examples include King Arthur, Robin Hood, Daniel Boone, and Davy Crockett. Contemporary icons such as Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Elvis Presley may also fit here.*

**Popular/Folk Fictions: These is the fictional space, where a culture's entertainment industry promotes popular or folk stories of heroes conflicting with villains.**

II. The Ritualistic Hero

The ritualistic hero includes any popular figure whose story is a routine popular visitation of the values he or she represents. Such figures appear over and over in this role, making them into episodic-type of heroes.

Examples include John Wayne, Harrison Ford, Clint Eastwood, and Will Smith.

*Fictional/Non-Fictional Space*

*In Between Category -- Celebrity Performers*

*This section includes any sort of figure that is recognizable as a celebrity and a performer, but is also acknowledged for some sort of actual physical or artistic talent. Examples from professional wrestling include Andre the Giant, Hulk Hogan, Bret Hart, Steve Austin, and the Rock. In addition, figures such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Lee, and Jackie Chan fit this category. They are lesser versions of the ritual hero, but more hyperreal than contemporary artists/sports figures.*

**Contemporary Non-Fictional Icon Stories: Here, stories circulate of contemporary media or local folk celebrities. In America, their lives are often filtered through the Horatio Alger story, representing some sort of achievement which adds to the nation's prestige. In general though, any sort of figure that represents national identity can be figured here, whether in a positive or negative way.**

III. The Contemporary/Actual Political/Artist/Sports Icon

This section includes the currently popular performer, athlete, politician, or celebrity that has attained popular notoriety, either favourable or unfavourable.

Examples include Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky, and Tiger Woods. While Gretzky adds to Canadian national pride, Ben Johnson articulates a sense of Canadian shame.

## APPENDIX 3: The Elusive Structure of Fan Feelings

Aside from a general parallel to ancient myths, wrestling characters are reflective of the structure of feeling of a cultural time period and its corresponding wrestling era. Wrestlers do not exist in a vacuum; in fact, the most successful characters can be seen as manifestations of other popular heroes/villains and as manifestations of a particular national/cultural identity. To illustrate, consider roughly, the last three eras in wrestling. Unfortunately, it is cumbersome determining what fans will like and dislike. Fortunately, the past twenty years illustrate the way fan tastes have changed and the way wrestling has responded. In *Media Matters*, Fiske explains Raymond Williams's concept of "structure of feeling" as a "phrase to refer to what it feels like to be a member of a particular culture, or to live in a particular society at a particular time" (8). It is impossible to go into extensive detail and to provide a complete picture of a time period's structure of feeling; however, a parallel can be drawn between political/social events and wrestling style changes. So, to illustrate the different structure of feeling of wrestling fans, consider three different WWF heroes over the past twenty years, Andre the Giant, Hulk Hogan, and Bret Hart; then, consider the way fans and promoters negotiate with one another to determine the heroic or villainous status of a wrestler's persona (such as Ric Flair's aristocrat persona).

Andre the Giant is a late 1970s and early 1980s performer who transcended the sport as a powerful, but tragic, personality. In *Wrestling Madness*, Hunter says *Sports Illustrated* presented "the largest profile they had run on any single athlete" up to that point with the December 21, 1981 article entitled "Andre the Giant." Andre exemplified the era of wrestling's genetic freaks. After wrestling's television boom in the 1950s, it went back to local arenas and less mainstream

exposure. To draw more interest, promoters relied on bloody violence and physically extraordinary wrestlers. In an attempt to disprove wrestling's cultural status as "fake," the spectacle of blood and violence sold the realism of the performance. Moreover, "real" giants and other such abnormal characters appeared. Replacing the 1950s television athlete were literally larger-than-life 1960s and 1970s genetic freaks. In a sense, wrestling brought the spectacle of the circus side show into the ring, maximizing wrestling's television emphasis on unusual characters. Like the anti-establishment structure of feeling felt throughout America in the 1960s and 1970s, wrestling littered itself with "freaks of nature" and other such characters that seemed to have no other home. Moreoever, the brutal violence of Vietnam entered the homes of television viewers as wrestlers placed a greater emphasis on blood and brutality in the ring.

Standing over seven feet and four inches tall and weighing over five hundred pounds, the most notable hero of that era was Andre the Giant. Andre was a fan-favorite, a gentle giant that proved his real strength and ability for years. He would catch three hundred pound men in mid-air; he would move small cars; he would make all of the other large wrestlers appear small. In an era of anti-establishment, Andre reiterated a belief in the natural self and a positive attitude. Even though Andre was a physical abnormality, his abnormality was natural. He was born with a hyperactive growth hormone problem that would give him great size and strength, but a short life. His big smile and positive attitude turned his defect into a positive force. Andre thrived in an era when America was rediscovering itself after the internal tension stemming from the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate Scandal. Although this may be too simple an association, Andre embodied the American malaise of the 1970s. As

mentioned earlier, it is difficult to be certain as to whether fans consciously looked to Andre as a hero for these reasons; nonetheless, the association can be made. In the late 1970s, films such as *Superman* and *Star Wars* appeared, reflecting a movie industry shift from counter-culture heroes to larger-than-life heroes. Very simply then, Andre was a hero for two reasons. One, he was a larger-than-life figure, a "freak" of nature, whose size reflected the superpower status of the United States Two, he reflected the nation's ability to cope. Andre himself was coping with his own condition, bringing a bit of hope to a disillusioned America. The 1970s was a time of political, cultural, and economic uncertainty and malaise in America. Like America itself, despite being the biggest and the strongest, Andre was weak, doomed to an early death because of an internal malignancy. Fortunately for America, another hero came along in the 1980s.

Hulk Hogan was the ritual superhero, an ethical ideal who replaced Andre and illustrated the superhuman power of the American champion. In Palmer's *Film of the Eighties*, the 1980s are said to parallel the 1950s. Comparing Eisenhower to Reagan, Palmer says, "Both had the previous decade's war to remember and get over. Except for brush-fire wars of short duration, compared with World War II and Vietnam, both decades enjoyed peace attended by cold war manuevering against Russia" (ix). The 1980s saw the rise of the moral majority and the proliferation of televangelists. In movies, the muscles of Stallone and Schwarzenegger made their mark; they were comic book heroes brought to life. Similarly, Hulk Hogan took his name from the Incredible Hulk. Like the Incredible Hulk, Hogan would become enraged at the turning point in a match and unleash his invincible self, leading to almost two decades of victories. Hulk Hogan was a family hero and WWF wrestling became family viewing. Blood and brutality

was replaced by ritual family melodrama, with Hogan at the lead. Hogan's enemies were foreigners, traitors, and monsters. Foreigners included figures such as the Arabic figure, the Iron Sheik, and, the Scottish figure, Rowdy Roddy Piper; traitors included Paul "Mr. Wonderful" Orndorff and Randy "The Macho Man" Savage; monsters included King Kong Bundy and Andre the Giant. Signalling the end of Andre's era, Hulk Hogan defeated the giant in 1987, signalling the height of American wrestling's ritual superhero. Along with his 1980s film contemporaries, Stallone and Schwarzenegger, Hogan was a muscular hero in comic book fashion. And his every feud was a ritual. Hogan would be betrayed, a martyr, like Lincoln. Then, from the death of betrayal, Hogan would rise up, training and rebuilding himself for a climactic battle. Within the climactic battle itself, Hogan would typically suffer for the early part of the match, and then "hulk" up, unleashing his unbeatable inner strength, and ultimately proving the power of good. Despite wrestling's insistence that power corrupts, Hogan remained a victorious hero for well over ten years, until he defected to the NWO in WCW. Cleansing the ring of its international enemies, its internal traitors, and overcoming seemingly indestructible monsters, Hulk Hogan became America's champion, well into the 1990s.

Rumours of steroid use made mainstream headlines in 1991, signalling the end of an era and the first serious threat to Hogan's role model image. According to Hofstede in *Slammin'*, the owner of the WWF, Vince McMahon went to trial in 1994 on drug charges (81). Rumours of steroid abuse and other forms of drug abuse among WWF wrestlers hit the headlines, sparking controversy and scandal. In a sense, one could say that the 1990s structure of feeling was one of scandal, outrage, and documentary reality. High profile court cases from Anita Hill and

Clarence Thomas to the O.J. Simpson murder trial and daytime court television shows mark the decade. The beating of Rodney King was captured on video, a trailer for the L.A. riots. The spectacle of scandal and the search for truth mark the decade and wrestling was no different. Beginning with Vince McMahon's steroid trial, the WWF was entering another change of hero. The superhero ritual of Hogan was too simplistic for an America of camcorders and injustice. So, to reflect the changing structure of feeling, the WWF moved from ritual and placed an emphasis on athleticism, replacing Hulk Hogan with Bret Hart. A second-generation wrestler around six feet tall, Hart humanized wrestling once again. Both larger-than-life, Andre was a giant and Hogan was a superhero; they were phenomenal physical specimens. In contrast, Bret Hart was of average size and much smaller than his predecessors. However, he had much more athletic skill. His technical ability, hard work, and dedication made up for his lack of size and strength. Helping the WWF overcome its steroid muscle-bound label, Bret Hart helped establish a new type of hero. Interestingly, the end of Hart's WWF career was also related to scandal, stemming from his defeat at Survivor Series by being double-crossed by McMahon.

Along with this slippery notion of being able to tie into an era's structure of feeling, in wrestling, heroes are directly determined by a negotiation between promoters and fans. In the simplest sense, promoters stage conflicts by pitting opposites against one another; for instance, the aristocrat battles the country boy, the athlete battles the street fighter, or the giant battles the little guy. Dependant upon their tastes and who fills such roles, the fans cheer or boo whoever they please. In a more elaborate manner, promoters present extended melodramatic story-lines, where the line between good and evil are blurred and fans must decide

who to cheer or boo. Who plays the character is significant simply because a performer can bring a great deal to a role under a variety of circumstances. For instance, Ric Flair personifies the glamourous wrestler. Building off of Buddy Roger's "Nature Boy" image of the platinum blonde hair, arrogant strut, and expensive tastes, the "Nature Boy" Ric Flair has often been a villain in his career. However, like most older wrestlers, Flair attains a legendary status in the minds of fans. According to Hofstede's *Slammin'*, Flair has wrestled since 1972 and earned over 30 wrestling championships across North America and Japan (26-27). His work ethic and commitment to energizing fans through dedicated performances has made him into a wrestling legend. Nowadays, as an audience homage to Flair, whenever any wrestler in any organization chops another in the chest (one of Flair's characteristic moves), fans often respond with Flair's characteristic cry of "Whooo!" So, late in his career, even if Flair is presented doing villainous acts, the fans feel the need to express their gratitude for his years of wrestling and cheer. Consequently, even though the aristocrat was a standard villain, Flair is cheered not as a haughty high-class villain, but as a hard-working hero whose wealth, strut, and attitude represent success and upward mobility. Thus, who plays the character is extremely important and can change the dynamic of a conflict. Overall then, heroes and villains in wrestling (such as Andre, Hogan, and Hart) are determined by an era's structure of feeling and by an elusive relationship between promoters, the persona of the wrestler, and the temperament of the fans.